

Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party:

Udon Kamono

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The Paladin of the Arrivers

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lie within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risk everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, who held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. They also happened to be the party that took me in. Our party, however, was currently in the midst of a grave problem. We were split into two opposing sides... all over a single woman.

A woman who was presently standing beside me, her arms linked around mine as she looked up at me with batting eyelashes.

“You don’t mind if I join the party, do you, Note?”

Roslia Minkgott pressed herself firmly against me. Her deep indigo hair tickled my cheek, but worse yet... the sensation of her breasts practically swallowing my arm made my mouth slacken into a dumb grin.

No! Don’t be fooled, Note!

I vigorously shook my head to pull myself together.

“For now, would you mind just taking a step back? We can talk after that,” I asked.

The Arrivers were presently at a crossroads concerning Roslia joining the party. This was absolutely *not* the time to let myself get distracted and drool over her charms.

Just to be clear, the issue of whether or not Roslia should join the party had nothing to do with her competence as an adventurer. After having witnessed her top-tier skill—Guide of the Holy Sword—for myself, I knew she was the real deal. Instead, the question at hand was simply about her personality.

“I don’t want to. I’m staying right here until you agree,” she protested.

“Everyone else is opposed to you joining because of *you*, not because I haven’t agreed to it!” I protested louder.

Roslia was what you would call a vixen... No, a temptress.

She enjoyed seducing men and breaking their hearts. She was a dangerous woman who was notorious for wrecking party after party,

turning its members against each other in the name of “love.” *That* was who she really was beneath her cute exterior.

And, unfortunately, it seemed I was her newest mark.

You see, I recently pulled one over on Roslia and ended up making her fight an entire gang of bandits... I figured she was probably holding a grudge over that, but it seemed she’d taken a mysterious interest in me. Thanks to that, she now wanted to join the Arrivers.

Personally, I wasn’t opposed to the idea. And no, it wasn’t because she was throwing herself at me. I knew good and well that Roslia didn’t actually care about me, that this was probably just part of some elaborate revenge plot. But even so, I thought she was more than capable enough to make a real contribution to the party.

The other Arrivers, however, weren’t all of the same mind. Our silver-haired mage, for one, was vocally against Roslia joining up.

“Absolutely not! There’s no way we’re letting a troublemaker like her into the party!” she cried.

Erin was the type to speak her mind freely. But while her tone could be harsh and she was always ready to pick a fight with me, she was a nice girl at heart.

“And you, Note! Wipe that pathetic look off your face!”

Okay, I take that back. Erin was just a bossy pain in the neck.

“I-I’m against it too...” stammered Neme timidly.

Neme was our party’s priestess. She stood only about as tall as my waist and looked as young as could be, but she was really 22 years old. A “mature woman,” in her own words.

Together, she and Erin—the female half of our party—composed the anti-Roslia faction. The other side, the pro-Roslia faction, was led by our blue-haired swordsman.

“We should totally let Roslia join! Who would turn down such a cutie?!” he shouted.

Force was a simple man, completely faithful to his desires. He was also the leader of the Arrivers. And despite his enthusiastic support of Roslia now, he himself was one of her past victims. She’d “dumped” him just the other day, actually. I had to kind of admire his undaunted attitude.

“She’s got what it takes, so I think she’d make a good addition...” I interjected.

While I was part of the pro-Roslia faction alongside Force, I didn’t have any ulterior motives like he did. Honest. But the anti-faction would never believe me. Both Erin and Neme were giving me dirty looks, apparently under the impression Force and I had both been bewitched by Roslia.

“Then what do *you* think?!” Erin asked, turning to our fifth and

final member.

She was talking to Jin, the guy who'd invited me into the Arrivers when I was drifting from party to party. He was also my thief mentor.

"I don't mind either way. I'll leave the decision to everyone else," he said.

Jin had maintained a neutral position this whole time, evading the pressure from both sides. It was honestly kind of unfair...

"Okay! I think I should join too, so that makes it three against two! I'm in! Yay!" Roslia cheered, applauding her victory as Force clapped with her.

Hey, I'm supporting you here, but you don't get a vote. You're still an outsider...

Roslia's lighthearted and carefree behavior took its toll on Erin, who was so heated that you could practically see the veins popping out of her temples. But just as she was on the verge of losing it, the ever-calm Jin stepped in.

"Let's all just calm down for a second and think about this. For example, why don't we take Roslia on as a temporary member for a day? That way, we can take her into the dungeon and see how things go."

His perfectly reasonable suggestion managed to win over even the reluctant Erin, who set aside her fury and acquiesced. It made me realize just how important having an impartial party was...

I'm sorry I thought you were being unfair for staying neutral, Jin.

"It's been a while since I was in the dungeon last, but it's pretty nice to be back!" Roslia pronounced, spreading her arms wide and taking a deep breath of the dungeon air.

Her carefree remark, however, only further soured Erin's mood.

"It would've been nicer without you here," she grumbled.

"What are you so grumpy for, Erin? Just look at this beautiful sky and let it lift your spirits!"

"You little..."

Roslia wasn't the slightest bit deterred by Erin. It was almost like she was in her own world. Apparently sensing that there was no point in trying to argue with her, our sharp-tongued mage simply gave her the cold shoulder instead.

Roslia must have nerves of steel... She knows she's not wanted here, but she's charging right ahead with this anyway.

We were currently on the second floor of the Dungeon of Puriff. Roslia had previously gone as far as floor 4 with another party (of men), meaning that I had the least progress out of anyone. I'd only ever made it to floor 2, and that was with the other Arrivers carrying me.

The dungeon contained warp crystals that adventurers could use to teleport to any previously reached floor. In other words, my progress hamstrung us all. The farthest we could go together was floor 2, which is why we were starting there today.

Unlike the gloomy caves of floor 1, floor 2 was a dense, verdant forest. I could understand why Roslia was pleased to be here.

Gigantic trees towered overhead, making all of us feel small. The damp earth underfoot muted our footsteps and added to the oh-so organic feel of the place. A tepid fog surrounded us, brushing gently against our cheeks as we pressed forward.

“I gotta say, Roslia... I’m kinda surprised you had a proper set of armor.”

I couldn’t help remarking Roslia’s new getup. She’d previously been passing herself off as a priestess, so I’d only ever seen her in her vestments and the outfit she wore on our date that one time. I’d never seen her looking the part of a paladin, the battle style she was currently applying for. I was a little nervous about how she’d handle the role, but seeing her imposing figure now... It reaffirmed my faith in her. No matter how you looked at her, she was a splendid paladin.

“I have plenty of coin to spare since the adventurers around town are always giving me presents.”

You mean because you’re constantly swindling them?! I should’ve known better!

Upon closer inspection, I could see that there wasn’t a single scratch on her armor. It had to be brand new. She must’ve bought it just for the occasion.

“Hey, Roslia! I gave you a present too, remember? That expensive staff! Are you taking good care of it?” Force enthusiastically cut in.

An expensive staff, huh? Wait, that’s right...

As I was recalling what had happened at the weapon shop, Roslia rather casually delivered a crushing blow to Force.

“Oh, I sold that to buy this armor.”

“What? No way... That thing was expensive...”

“Sorry, but it’s the truth. I sold it so I could come adventuring with Note!”

I admit I couldn’t help feeling sorry for Force. Even though he kind of brought it on himself...

But, hey, don’t make it sound like this was all my fault, Roslia!

Force was glaring daggers at me. Fortunately, however, it was right about then that I detected some nearby monsters with Enemy Search. This was the perfect opportunity to change the subject.

“All right, enough fooling around. Monsters are coming... Three of them, I think? They’re still too far for me to tell what, but they’re approaching from the front.”

“Listen up, Roslia,” Erin said in an icy tone. “If you want to join our party, you should be able to handle this much by yourself without any trouble. We’re not going to help you.”

She was blunt, but she had a point. We were here to test Roslia’s abilities as a paladin. If we didn’t at least get a feel for her strength, the whole trip would be moot. That said... it wasn’t anything worth dying for.

Knowing that, Jin threw her a lifeline.

“Of course, we’ll jump in if you’re in over your head,” he offered.

“It’s fine,” Roslia replied, shaking her head at his kind words.

“Erin can just watch vacantly like she usually does!”

“What makes you think that’s what I usually do...?” Erin grumbled.

Roslia paid her no mind, turning to face the oncoming monsters.

“Do I really have a vacant look on my face?” Erin asked no one in particular.

Umm, Erin... You aren’t supposed to have to mull that over.

I considered offering a kind word, but the monsters were closing the distance quickly now. A fight was imminent.

They appeared through the trees just as I turned around myself. They were a type of monster I hadn’t seen before. If I had to describe them, I’d say they were spiderlike... But they definitely weren’t spiders. Spiders didn’t have wings, after all. These strange flying bugs had another distinctive feature too—the black orbs they were carrying. They flew through the air, cradling the orbs with all eight legs.

We all braced for attack, but the bugs flew overhead. I’d just started to think we were all safe... when they dropped the orbs they were carrying.

“Impenetrable Fortress!” Roslia called out, summoning a wall of light that surrounded the six of us. It seemed to be some kind of spell.

The next thing I knew, we were all assaulted by a shockwave—no, by the *sight* of one. It took me a second to realize Roslia’s spell had blocked the impact of the explosion from the bug orbs, which mowed down the trees in the area. The landscape immediately around us outside of the brilliant barrier was now perfectly flat.

What power... So this is what dungeon monsters are really like.

An attack like that was enough to kill your average adventurer in one hit. These monsters were in a whole other league than the ones on the surface.

But more impressive still was the fact that Roslia had blocked their attack with no trouble. She’d instinctively moved to protect us all—proof that she herself was no average adventurer.

“Blades of Light...”

Roslia conjured three brilliant blades, one for each bug. These weren't her holy sword—just another spell.

“Take flight!”

On her cue, three beams shot toward the bugs. Rather, they were simply the trails of light that her brilliant blades left behind. Each one pierced its target, dropping a twitching bug to the ground. Thanks to Enemy Search, I could tell they were dead.

“Well, how was that?” Roslia asked, turning to me. “What do you think of my performance?”

“You don't have to ask me. I already know you're strong. Erin's the one you need to convince,” I replied.

We then both looked at Erin, who averted her gaze awkwardly.

“I couldn't tell you what happened. I was only watching on vacantly.”

Wow, is she still mad about that?

“So I get to join the party now, right?”

Upon clearing the second floor, the Arrivers reluctantly decided to accept Roslia. We'd been in dire need of a tank all this time since we couldn't proceed any further into the dungeon without one. So, given the circumstances, Roslia was actually a good fit. The only reservation was about her personality, which had the potential to cause all kinds of problems.

Erin, as a matter of course, had objected up to the bitter end.

“Just because we've accepted you doesn't mean you get to stay if you cause any trouble,” she was quick to warn our newest member.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Roslia asked, coyly cocking her head as she grabbed my hand.

“That! Exactly that!” Erin shrieked.

“But I don't understand...”

“There's no way you aren't doing this on purpose! I'm talking about the way you go from man to man like a bee with flowers!”

“Oh, don't you worry! My heart belongs exclusively to Note now.”

“H-Hey, you don't have to joke around like that!” Force jumped in.

He walked over and reached out to put a hand on Roslia's shoulder, but she smacked him away.

“Sorry, but can you not touch me? I promised I'd stay away from you, so I'd prefer it if you didn't come near me either. I'm not interested.”

Force stared at her blankly, unable to hide his abject shock. I have to say it almost felt good to see him laid so low. “Serves you right” is what I wanted to say after all the trouble he'd caused. Leaving the party was one thing, but he'd been all too eager to twist the knife in

my side when he thought he could lord his cute girlfriend over me. This was his just deserts as far as I was concerned. I had no idea why Roslia had latched on to me, honestly, but my suspicions were irrelevant in the face of such sweet satisfaction.

Fed up with the smug grin that had unwittingly crept across my face, Erin put a hand to her forehead as though attempting to suppress an oncoming headache.

“Whatever... Do whatever you want...” she groaned.

“Did you hear that, Neme?! She said I could do whatever I want! Let’s take her up on that! I’m so tired right now... I could really use a massage. Preferably in your room,” Roslia clamored.

“Stop right there! I take it back! As if I’d let you commit such indecency in our house!” Erin shouted.

“Oh? What part of a massage sounds indecent to you?” Roslia asked, cocking her head innocently.

That expression... Yeah, she definitely knew what she was doing. She was deliberately teasing the infuriated Erin.

“Shut your trap, you hussy! Why are you trying to make it sound like *I’m* the one with the dirty mind?!”

“Um, I’m still a virgin, just so you know. I’ve never even kissed a boy before, so calling me a hussy is a bit...”

“Huh?!” I couldn’t help gasping.

How could she tell such a brazen lie at a time like this?!

Embarrassed by my own reaction, I looked around to see how everybody else had responded. They were all either completely slack-jawed or standing there with a hand over their mouths in shock.

“I’m a devout Cecinaist,” Roslia explained. “There’s no way I would do anything indecent with a man I wasn’t going to marry. That’s just the nature of our faith, isn’t it, Neme?”

Neme, a fellow Cecinaist, nodded reluctantly.

“I-It is. Roslia might actually be telling the truth...”

“Hang on, Neme. Does Cecinaism forbid that kind of relationship when you’re unwed?” Erin asked.

“That’s right!” Neme declared with an emphatic nod.

But that only made Erin narrow her eyes in suspicion.

“So what about all those times you claimed, ‘Neme is an adult woman with lots of experience in love’? What about all those vague stories you told me? Were those all tall tales, then?”

“U-Uh...” Neme stammered, her eyes darting about as she broke out in a nervous sweat.

This was getting painful to watch... Talk about secondhand embarrassment.

“And what about that time you said, ‘Neme was super popular when she was your age, Erin. She had tons of trysts, so you should get

out there and get some experience too’?! I won’t forgive you if that superior act was all some delusion!”

Overkill, Erin! Have some mercy!

Neme was already crushed. Her eyes were dead, empty voids.

“I-It was all made up. I’m sorry...” she muttered, looking away pitifully.

I guess we can chalk Neme up as another victim of the Roslia effect. Wait, no... She was just reaping what she’d sown here.

“Neme’s circumstances aside, I hope that proves I’m still a virgin,” Roslia offered, throwing a welcome escape rope out of the awkward situation.

“I guess...” Erin reluctantly conceded. “Sorry for calling you a hussy.”

“It’s fine, really. I honestly wouldn’t mind giving up my first time for Note...”

Wait... For real?!

I nearly fell for Roslia’s honeyed words, but Erin’s glowering eyes brought me back to reality.

“What are you thinking, letting her play you like that?”

“I-I’m not being played...”

That was a lie. I was *definitely* on the verge of getting played.

“See? She’s bad news. We’ll have to do something if she’s going to join us... Okay, from now on, intraparty romance is forbidden in the Arrivers. *No one* is having sex with this woman,” Erin declared, unmistakably looking at me.

How little did she trust me? I guess this was my comeuppance for getting swept away just now...

“Hey, hold on a minute!” Force suddenly interjected, thrusting his hand up like he was signaling for a timeout. “You can’t ban relationships within the party! That means I can’t date Roslia!”

“That’s not going to happen anyway,” Roslia replied without missing a beat.

Savage.

Force crumbled to his knees at her harsh words.

What the heck are we gonna do...?

I shot Jin a pleading look, but he shook his head. I was suddenly stung with a twinge of regret. Maybe letting Roslia into the party was a bad idea after all...

The Training From Here On

The day after we cleared floor 2, Jin invited me to a sparse stretch of land outside town for some training. And the first thing he said when we got there was...

“Starting today, you’re going to be learning new thief arts.”

“New arts?!”

Those words made my heart soar.

“That’s right. You’ve done well with Enemy Search, Trap Detection, and Trap Dismantling, so I think it’s about time you try your hand at a few more.”

“Really?! Thank you so much!”

I was over the moon that Jin was acknowledging my progress. So much so that I yelled loud enough to startle myself. Jin, however, just warmly smiled as I bowed my head.

“So, what new thief arts am I going to be learning?”

“I’m going to teach you Stealth and some evasive arts.”

“Stealth and evasive arts?” I parroted.

Jin nodded and explained, “Allow me to start with Stealth, which is an art that makes it harder for monsters to target you. Learning it is important because, once you do, we won’t have to divert part of our forces in order to protect you anymore.”

“Yeah, that does sound like it’ll be useful.”

If I could learn Stealth, I would be less of a burden to the party on the battlefield. That was *definitely* an art I wanted.

“And evasive arts are arts for avoiding attacks and stuff, right?”

“That’s right. ‘Evasive arts’ is a catch-all for arts in that vein. I’d like you to master several of them.”

“I understand why I need Stealth, but why do I need evasive arts too?”

“The first reason is simply because I’d like you to prioritize increasing your own survivability. You can only conquer dungeons if you’re alive, after all. I want you to be able to handle yourself when Stealth fails you or when stray attacks come flying your way. It’ll also be a useful foundation for learning combat techniques.”



Combat techniques...

I reacted to those words with a full-body shudder.

I'd dreamed of being one of those awe-inspiringly strong fighters since I joined the Arrivers... No, since the day I first set my heart on becoming an adventurer. I knew I was nowhere near achieving that dream, but I hadn't given up on it yet. My passion had waned in the face of crushing reality, but it wasn't extinguished by any means.

I wanted to repay the Arrivers for the kindness they'd shown me—for the faith they had in me. That was my greatest desire right now. And in order to do that, I was prepared to abandon my dream and devote myself to supporting them from the rear line.

But as it turned out... the road I'd been walking wasn't leading me away from my dream, but steadily closer to it. That realization made me happier than anything.

"Now, I'll start with teaching you the basics of Stealth today. An important feature of this art is that it can be applied not only to yourself, but also to things you're in close contact with. That includes your gear, of course, but it also allows you to mask the presence of one other person. I'm going to use it on us now so you can experience it for yourself. Once you get a handle on what it feels like, try masking your own presence by copying it."

"You want me to copy a feeling? This sounds like it's going to be difficult..."

"I'm sure it's easier than it sounds. It'll be far simpler than me trying to explain it, so this should go much more smoothly than Enemy Search did," Jin said, reaching out and placing a hand on my shoulder. "Here I go."

The next moment, it was like I was gone.

I could feel my existence fading away, like I was having an out-of-body experience. It felt like I was no longer physically part of the world, like only my soul remained. Like the life I had lived up until now was just an illusion and this solitude was true reality. That's what it felt like.

"Okay, I'm dismissing it now."

At those words, I returned to my senses. I took a few deep breaths to catch myself up and calm down.

"Wow, so that's what Stealth feels like..."

"Think you got the feel of it? Well, even if you forget it, just say the word and I'll show you again."

"Okay..."

Jin was kind to offer, but I didn't think I'd be forgetting that peculiar sensation any time soon.

With Roslia joining the party, the Arrivers promptly resumed dungeon diving. I was to practice my new arts in the process. We spent the day after I learned Stealth clearing floor 3, so I had to wait until the day after that to officially begin learning evasive arts.

“Were you watching me in the dungeon yesterday like I asked?”

“Yes. I mean, I was trying to, but you’re too fast for me to follow...”

Jin had led our dungeon run yesterday to demonstrate evasive arts. He’d apparently tried to use them in such an exaggerated way that even a newbie like me could see what he was doing, but I didn’t catch any of it. I had no clue what he’d used, much less how he moved so fast.

That’s what I was about to explain politely, but it seemed Jin had other plans...

“I’m going to attack you now, so I want you to imitate what you saw yesterday and dodge. Understand?”

No, I don’t understand at all... How the heck am I supposed to do that?

“Isn’t this, uh, kind of a dangerous way to learn? Surely there’s a safer option...”

“I think this is the most natural. Evasive arts are something you acquire through combat experience. Your body will naturally pick up the technique as you practice.”

“That much makes sense, but going up against you, Jin... Honestly, I can’t see myself dodging you. Ever.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t just throw you to the wolves and have you learn against dungeon monsters.”

“That’s true...”

The monsters in the dungeon would have no mercy. One slip-up would mean death. Jin, however, wouldn’t be trying to kill me. While that was a relief, I had the feeling that his attacks would be several times more difficult to evade than any dungeon monster’s.

This is like starting out on hard mode...

Hoping Jin would be kind enough to go easy on me, I agreed to the exercise and stood ready to face him. This would be simple in theory: he would attack and I would dodge.

“Okay, here we go,” he said.

I nodded in acknowledgment, narrowing my eyes with intense focus to make sure I didn’t miss a single thing.

“...”

Huh?

I thought I saw Jin moving his mouth, but the next thing I knew, I

was flying through the air.

What... just happened?

It was only after I came crashing down to the ground that I realized I'd been thrown. The fall knocked the wind out of me for a moment, but the sharp pain running up my spine brought me back to my senses.

"You're not pulling any punches, are you...?" I groaned.

"What are you talking about?" Jin asked, raising both hands in a dramatic shrug. "The monsters in the dungeon won't go easy on you. Isn't it only natural for me to be serious too?"

He had a point there... but something was really eating at me. Was this anger, or perhaps frustration? I hadn't expected to develop a competitive streak.

Fine. If he's gonna be like that, I'll learn to evade even if it kills me. I'll use all of the tricks in my arsenal to dodge him, no matter what it takes.

I cursed Jin internally and quickly discarded the notion that I couldn't win against him. I was serious this time. Dead serious. I was going to win against Jin for real. I was unprepared before, but I now drew my dagger—the one Erin had bought for me—from its sheath on my belt. I held it in my right hand and braced for an attack.

The corners of Jin's mouth curled into a grin as he watched me.

"Great. I knew you had potential in you, Note. You've already got the first step down. Even if you're only evading, you need to have your weapon at the ready. If you run away unarmed, you're just an easy target in the enemy's eyes."

Enough with the explanation! Let's do this!

Jin's sage words were going in one ear and out the other; I was just chomping at the bit to get started. He seemed to read my mind, however, and gingerly nodded.

"...Shadow Runner..."

A black silhouette loomed before me.

If a change in mindset was all it took to become strong, there would be no hardship in the world.

My first day of evasion training ended in brutal defeat: 15 to 0. I couldn't land a single hit on Jin, much less win against him. I finally blacked out in the fifteenth round and woke up back here at HQ.

The pain I'd felt in my joints while I was fighting Jin was now gone without a trace. It seemed Neme had used a recovery spell on me while I was unconscious. I offered her my sincere thanks, at which she proudly put her hands on her hips.

"Yes, very good! You should always show Neme this kind of respect!"

It was a little irritating. After I managed to shake her off, I left the

living room and headed upstairs to Jin's room. I wanted to check in with him and thank him too.

"So... how did I do? What's the prognosis?" I asked tentatively.

"Hmm... It's too soon to say. This was only your first day, after all," he replied. "But it wasn't bad."

Wasn't bad, huh?

As far as I was concerned, I hadn't done a single thing right today. But Jin was kind and chose his words with great consideration... Almost apologetically so sometimes.

He proceeded to give me several pointers after that.

Jin's advice, however, was always vague and abstract. It had been that way ever since he first started mentoring me in thief arts. At first, I wasn't quite sure if he was just bad at teaching or if that was simply how he'd been taught himself... But everything always came together once I achieved a certain level of understanding. Even if Jin was abstract, he was never wrong. It felt like he was some genius that just functioned on a different level—and sometimes his genius was lost on me.

After I left Jin's room, I went to wash away the dirt I'd collected getting thrown to the ground so many times. I rinsed myself off, got in the bathtub, and reflected on the day's training. Visualizing and preparing mentally was all I could do at this point. I had no idea if it would even help, but it felt better than doing nothing.

I imagined dozens, then hundreds of battles with Jin... and I lost every single one. Nevertheless, I resolved to try some of my better ideas tomorrow. There wasn't much else I could do right now other than train up Stealth, which I could train by myself regardless of the situation. In that sense, it was like Enemy Search. I personally preferred these types of arts.

So from now on, I'd practice Stealth whenever I had the chance. It was all about faithfully putting in the time, just like I had with my other arts. Thus, as I sank into the bath, I tried to recall the sensation of disappearing from the world.

Puriff Beach

A vast expanse of blue spread out before us. The boundary between the azure sky overhead and the ultramarine ocean below was almost indistinguishable. The scent of seawater tickled my nostrils as the sun shone down on my shoulders. It was enough to make you forget that we were in a dungeon.

That's right. We were currently on the fourth floor of the Dungeon of Puriff.

The sky here looked no different from the real thing outside. There was even a sun floating far above us, making this floor truly seem endless. The sea stretched all the way to the horizon, dotted with islands here and there. I'd never been to the real sea myself, but I would've bet this was just what it looked like.

According to the other Arrivers, we would clear this floor by following a string of smaller islands to reach the door to floor 5. This floor was clearly different than the ones we'd conquered so far, but it had another notable feature too. The dungeon's warp crystals all had barriers around them to protect them from monsters. The crystal on floor 4 was no exception. Rather, it was the size of its barrier that made it exceptional.

It was large enough to cover a whole island. That meant the entire beach was a safe zone—making it one of the hottest tourist spots of the Dungeon of Puriff. There were swimsuit-clad beachgoers as far as the eye could see.

Of course, this beach wasn't accessible to just anyone. Only adventurers who had the ability to make it to floor 4—and the people they carried here—could make it. All you had to do was reach it once and you could use the warp crystal to come back anytime you wanted. It was such a popular destination that there were adventuring groups in Puriff that specialized in carrying people here.

"You don't look too happy," Jin said in a kind voice.

He stood next to me, his toned figure largely revealed by his black swim trunks. He looked just like you'd expect a top-tier adventurer to... Completely unlike me.

"It's just..." I mumbled, looking down at my scrawny chest and arms. "I don't think we should be playing around like this."

You see, the Arrivers had come to Puriff Beach for a day of fun in the sun. And, to be honest, I wasn't thrilled about it. Rather than

goofing off, I thought we'd be better off making progress in the dungeon. Yet nevertheless, here I was dressed in swim trunks just like Jin in spite of my protests. I'm sure that undercut my objections quite a bit.

Now, how did we end up in this situation in the first place, you ask?

"This is paradise! Just look at this bevvv of beautiful bathing babes! Boy, am I glad I stuck with being an adventurer!"

The answer was our party leader, who was currently frolicking in the sand: Force Granz.

The Arrivers' current goal was to get me and Roslia to floor 15—the party's highest cleared floor so far. Based on research, it was believed that the Dungeon of Puriff had a total of approximately thirty floors, meaning the Arrivers had only reached the halfway point. But that wasn't a strike against them; far from it, actually. Their progress was virtually unprecedented.

Out of the adventuring parties currently active in our kingdom, the furthest anyone had actually reached was floor 19. And historically speaking, the furthest floor *ever* reached was floor 25. That was the kind of competition the Arrivers were up against, and they'd still made it to floor 15. Considering the difficulty of the dungeon increased exponentially with every floor, however, they were still a long way away from completely conquering it...

Which was precisely why I was opposed to the idea of wasting time here at the beach. Especially after I'd taken so long working my way up just to getting in the dungeon. Not to mention the time we'd squandered trying to find a sixth member.

"It was a group decision. Besides, I believe it's important to take breaks too," Jin said, trying to soothe me.

The discontent must have been showing on my face. Unhappy as I was, however, it was true that I couldn't really oppose a decision the party had made by majority.

Force had suggested the beach trip, but Roslia was the first one to enthusiastically agree. Go figure, right? She only ever had men on her mind, so there was no way she'd turn down an opportunity like this. I had to wonder if she really cared about clearing the dungeon at all. There was still a possibility that she'd joined the Arrivers to get revenge on me.

The second person to jump on the beach bandwagon was Neme. I'd thought she'd be too shy to wear a swimsuit, but to my surprise, she readily declared that she would bewitch all the men at the beach with her figure... Granted, the only men *she'd* be bewitching were pedophiles. I'd have to keep an eye out for her.

Jin placed no objections. That left Erin, who I'd turned to with a

pleading look. She was my last hope to keep from being completely overruled, but she refused to throw me a lifeline. I asked her why later, but all she said was: "Isn't a vacation fine once in a while?" It was a bit hard to swallow after she'd been so critical of me when I was slacking off. Didn't she want to clear the dungeon as fast as possible? I was dying to ask her, but she seemed to be in a good mood that day, so I dropped it.

In the end, I was the sole dissenter on the subject of the seaside stopover. I tried pleading with Jin specifically as a last resort. If we had the time to take a day off, then I'd rather spend it practicing Stealth. I also wanted to spar with Jin more and work on learning evasive arts. That was the case I presented to him, but his response wasn't what I'd hoped for.

"I understand your desire to polish your techniques and move forward, but... I believe there's another issue that needs to be resolved first."

"Another issue?"

"I mean Roslia's relationship with the other party members. She may have opened up to you, Note, but she doesn't really talk to anyone else, does she? Force can't get a word in edgewise with her, and she's not particularly friendly with Erin or Neme either. It's like she has a wall up between her and other people."

Looking back on it now, Jin had a point. I wasn't willing to say Roslia and I were friends, exactly, but we did talk pretty often. She was painfully curt with Force (I wasn't sure if that was her way of keeping her promise to me or not). And she spoke politely to Jin, but that was about it.

Her relationship with the girls in the party, however, was the worst of all. They didn't trust her, and she didn't even try talking to them. When she was bored, she'd come after me for fun, which created a vicious cycle where Erin and Neme disliked her more by the day.

I understood why Jin insisted we needed to do something about the party dynamic, and thus I reluctantly agreed to the beach trip...

Which brings us to the present, where Jin and I were waiting out on the sand for the girls to finish changing. Force had already run off to dunk himself in the ocean.

"Did I keep you waiting, Note?" a clear voice called to me from behind.

I turned to see Roslia in a pure white swimsuit, which underscored her alabaster skin beautifully. I wasn't surprised to see her, exactly. I always had Enemy Search active, so I'd known that she was approaching. Nevertheless, when I turned around and actually saw her... she *definitely* caught me off guard. She was just that stunning.

“What do you think? Do you like my swimsuit?” she asked, twirling around to show herself off in spite of her bashful expression.

How cute... And how sly...

I couldn’t even answer Roslia. I’d never realized how much... jiggle... girls could have when they twirled. That was the only ridiculous thought occupying my head in the moment.

“Pathetic, Note. Wipe that dopey look off your face. Ugh...” came an acerbic rebuke that snapped me back to my senses.

It was Erin, of course, who was wearing a light blue swimsuit under a thin, hooded jacket. I guess some girls wouldn’t jiggle even if they twirled... I guess everyone knew that.

“You were thinking something rude just now, weren’t you?”

How could she tell? Had she read my mind? No, I’m sure it was written all over my face.

“Y-You’re imagining things.”

I managed to brush Erin off just as Neme arrived.

“Ta-dah! Behold Neme! Aren’t I sexy?!” she declared, putting one hand on her head and the other on her waist as she wiggled.

“Sexy”? *I think she meant “silly.” What’s with that pose?*

Contrary to her declaration, she wore a modest one-piece swimsuit that only made her look more childish.

“Yeah, you’re pretty cute...”

I couldn’t bring myself to tell her the truth when she was so confident. Sometimes you just have to tell little white lies, I reminded myself.

“You really think so?! You’ve got good taste after all, Note!”

My little white lie, however, went straight to Neme’s head. I was debating about how to rein her in when Roslia flashed a wicked grin.

“Don’t tell me... Is it true *that’s* what you’re into, Note?”

“Wait, what is that supposed to mean?!”

“They call you the Girl Snatcher, after all.”

“God, even you know about that...”

“You’ve got quite a reputation among the adventurers in Puriff, you know.”

This day was only getting worse. I should have just stayed home instead of coming on this dumb beach trip...

“So you’re not into little girls, then?” Roslia asked.

“Absolutely not,” I said with extra emphasis to make myself clear.

“That must mean you prefer mature women with shapely figures.”

“Yeah... I guess so?”

“Like me!” Roslia exclaimed, suddenly latching on to me.

She kinda cornered me on that one... I guess that’s one way to get the answer you want.

“Wipe that lecherous grin off your face, Note. You’re the worst,”

Erin hissed with an icy glare that grew colder by the second.

What am I supposed to do? Roslia's the one who's all over me, okay?

It seemed the tension in the party concerning our newest member was at an all-time high.

Jin's well-intentioned plan may yet end in failure...

Apparently, the fake sun inside the dungeon moved just like the one on the surface. It shifted in the sky overhead into what appeared to be early afternoon.

I was currently sitting in the hot sand watching a group of men and women play with a beachball. I meant the other Arrivers, of course. They looked like they were having fun together.

Objectively speaking here, I was the odd one out. I was sitting by myself, projecting that “loner” aura that begs being left alone, even at the beach. But don’t worry. This was what I wanted. No, honestly. I’m being serious.

“Because if I’m with them, Roslia would only talk to me...” I mumbled to myself, squinting in the sunlight.

I’d realized earlier this morning that when we were all together, Roslia barely spoke to anyone else. She was so clingy with me that the other girls didn’t look interested in talking to her, either. As a result, this beach trip meant to bring us all together was actually driving a wider wedge into the party.

Once I saw the writing on the wall, I knew I needed to remove myself from the situation. There was no point in just lounging around and watching everyone else from a distance, however, so I was practicing Stealth at the same time. I was more interested in practicing arts than having fun anyway, so it was all the same to me.

“Still... Being all alone like this is kind of a bummer.”

I’d done it on purpose, but a lonely feeling still hung over me. Perhaps that was why I was muttering to myself so much.

I’m such a weirdo...

I took a deep breath and refocused my concentration on Stealth. As I did, I noticed a girl in a hooded jacket walking this way languidly. Seeing her signature pigtails, I could tell at a glance that it was Erin. I casually watched her for a moment, thinking she was headed to the bathroom or something, but she walked right over to me.

She looked down at me, sitting on the ground with my arms around my knees, and asked, “What are you doing over here?”

“I should be the one asking you that,” I replied. “Why’d you come over here?”

If Erin removed herself from the situation too, there was no way she and Roslia were going to get closer. I replied to her question with

a question of my own in an attempt to keep this conversation short.

“You were doing such a bad job of erasing your presence that I got curious about what you were up to.”

My shoulders slumped dejectedly at the indirect insult. She was saying my Stealth was terrible.

“Why’d you sneak away from the group anyway?” she asked, taking a seat next to me.

Wait, did this mean she was planning on staying? That would make this whole operation pointless, so I decided to tell her the truth. Hopefully that would get her to go back.

“If I’d stayed with you, it would’ve just made things awkward between everyone and Roslia, you know?”

“I don’t get it. You sure think about that woman a lot.”

“Listen, that’s not what this is,” I said with a heavy sigh at her biting words. “I’m trying to be considerate of the entire party.”

“Now I *really* don’t get it. Just because things are smoother without you, you left yourself out on purpose? That doesn’t make any sense...”

“This isn’t just for you guys, okay? I need to practice my arts too. That’s what I wanted to spend today doing anyway. So why don’t you go on back to the group? Go on. Go and make friends with Roslia already,” I said, waving my hand in an attempt to shoo her away.

But Erin just shook her head.

“No. I don’t want to be friends with Roslia. That’s not gonna happen. We’re like fire and ice.”

“That may be true...”

Roslia had a long track record of making other women hate her, and Erin was pretty hard to get along with. I wanted them to be friends, but I couldn’t honestly see it happening.

“But if you stay, Erin, won’t Roslia come over here too? I’d like her to make friends with Neme, at least, so you should go back already. I’ll be practicing seriously, just like you wanted.”

Erin made to stand up, but stopped midway and sat back down.

“Um, did you hear me?” I asked.

“Yeah. Loud and clear. Which is why I’m staying,” she replied with an indiscernible emotion in her eyes. Rather than kindness, it seemed more like guilt. “If you don’t want Roslia to come over here, why don’t you use Stealth on me too? You can use it on one other person, right? So practice on both of us.”

“Well...”

It seemed Erin had no intention of going back to the group, leaving me with no choice. I caved and reached out for her right hand, but—

“Gross! Why are you trying to hold my hand, you pervert?!”

“What? I need to touch you to cast Stealth! You’re the one who’s making it perverted!”

“You can’t fool me. If you just need to touch me, then why go for my hand? Why should I have to hold hands with the likes of you?! Touch my leg or something!”

“...Fine...”

Frustrating as it was, Erin was right. Why had I gone for her hand, anyway? It wasn’t like I had any ulterior motives. I guess I was just unfazed by the idea now that I had Roslia grabbing me all the time. It was clearly a big deal to Erin, though.

Having to concede when she was being so arrogant was aggravating, but I didn’t want to add any fuel to her fire by insisting on taking her hand. With no other choice, I reached out and put my hand on her thigh.

Wait, isn’t this even worse?! Yeah. Yeah, it is. Touching a girl’s thigh is definitely worse than holding hands.

Her skin was so smooth and supple. I guess this was what they called wanting to know someone carnally... I’d never really given it much thought, but I suddenly found myself keenly aware of the fact that Erin was a woman.

Wait, what am I thinking? Lusting after Erin, of all people...

Unaware of my inner turmoil, she tossed a casual glance my way.

“Does it still bother you?” she asked.

“D-Does what? This?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? I meant that time I yelled at you.”

Phew, that was close... I nearly gave myself away...

The truth was that I *had* given myself away. Fortunately, Erin just didn’t seem to notice. Her mind was apparently elsewhere, as she’d brought up an argument we’d had about a month after I joined the party.

“Why are you bringing that up now?” I couldn’t help asking.

Erin scrutinized my face for a moment before averting her eyes.

“*You’re* the one who brought it up. That ‘just like you wanted’ comment. And you’re over here practicing your arts when you should be hanging out with everyone... I was just wondering if that’s my fault...”

It would be a lie to say I had forgotten about what she’d said to me that day, but I wouldn’t go as far as to say it still bothered me. I’d made my decision and I’d made it for myself. I was here because I wanted to be. That wasn’t on Erin.

“That’s not it. I’m doing this because I want to, so don’t worry about it,” I explained.

Erin stared straight into my eyes. She was probably trying to

figure out if I was telling the truth or not.

"You mean it?" she finally asked.

I nodded.

"You're an odd one," she said.

"No, I'm not. If anything, aren't you guys the weird ones?"

The bossy, hard-to-please Erin. The shy yet eccentric Neme. The shameless flirt Roslia. The single-minded, pleasure-seeking Force. The Arrivers were all oddballs. The only exceptions were me and Jin.

Erin, however, seemed to think otherwise.

"You're definitely weirder than me. I thought you were normal at first, but I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Because we're at the beach and you're over here practicing arts alone."

"I told you. That's because Roslia—"

"Isn't that an excuse? You just want to practice your arts."

"Ack..."

Her words pierced right through my chest. She'd hit the bullseye. The truth was that I wasn't really all that concerned about the party dynamic. The truth was that I wanted to be alone so I could practice Stealth.

"Why are you so serious about your dungeon training anyway, Note?" Erin asked further.

"Because I want to change."

"But why are you so willing to sacrifice yourself to do it? Like when you were practicing Enemy Search and Trap Detection simultaneously when I was mad at you. Or when you were so insistent on winning Force back from Roslia. Or right now. You're always trying to achieve your goal, even if it comes at a personal cost. Why? How can you go so far? I could never—"

Was Erin angry? Sad? Or perhaps something else? I wasn't sure where she was coming from. Was she criticizing me for giving up my day off with everyone to practice? If that was it, I wished she would just leave me alone already. I should be free to spend my days off how I pleased.

"Gifted people like you—people blessed with good skills and remarkable talent—wouldn't understand. For losers like me... If we *don't* sacrifice something, we don't stand a chance of catching up to people like you."

I thought my message was clear: *"You'll never know how I feel, so stop trying to understand me and stop trying to meddle."* I knew it was a little harsh, but I also knew I wasn't wrong.

After that, silence fell over us for a time.

"You really are odd," Erin eventually said, brushing the sand off

her swimsuit as she stood up. "Like you said, I may not understand. But it's not like I'm trying to stop you, so do whatever you want."

Erin walked away with a troubled, almost reproachful look on her face. As I watched her go, a strange feeling tugged at my heart.

A Duel?!

“...Shadow Runner...”

My vision suddenly went black. It took me a moment to realize something had knocked me over. A shadow loomed above my prone body. It was Jin, who had me pinned to the ground.

“Let’s call it here,” Jin said, releasing his weight from my back.

Today’s score was 17 to 0. Yet again, I’d been unable to evade a single attack. It had been like this ever since my evasion training began. I couldn’t dodge Jin’s opening blow, which took me out in a single hit every time. I was starting to feel pretty pathetic.

I tried everything I could think of time and time again, but to no avail. Not one of my trials had been effective in the face of Jin’s Shadow Runner—it was all error on my part. There was just nothing I could do against such overwhelming speed.

“All right,” I conceded reluctantly, forcing my beaten body back on its feet.

The sun was already beginning to set, dimming the landscape around us and signaling the end of practice for the day. If I insisted we keep going, I’d only be causing trouble for Jin, who had already started down the road back to town. As I watched him go, a restless despair stirred within me.

“Will I really be able to evade him one day...?”

Jin’s shadowy form flashed through my mind. His first strike was swift and certain. I wasn’t sure *anyone* could dodge it. Even if I had evasive arts at my disposal, that likely wouldn’t be enough to save me. My instincts were terrible. I couldn’t dodge anyone’s blows, much less Jin’s. I’d learned nothing.

And so practice came to an end that day with me more acutely aware than ever of the insurmountable gap between us.

“Sorry, Note. I won’t be able to train with you today,” Jin told me one sunny afternoon.

Apparently, he needed to go buy equipment for tomorrow’s dungeon run. The Arrivers had been making steady progress recently. The early floors were no match for them, even with me in tow. We’d cleared floor 6 just the other day. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before we cleared floor 15 and broke new ground.

So, needless to say, there was no way I was going to stop Jin from

preparing for a dungeon run. While I wanted nothing more than to train, I hated the thought of holding him up. With this sudden change of plans, however, I found myself free for a day.

Granted, I could've gone with Jin to help out. But if I were going to do that, then I was better off just spending my time training. Not that there was much I could do on my own...

While I was pondering such things, Jin departed HQ alone. I had to wonder why Erin or Force didn't go with him. They certainly had more free time than I did—not that I'd ever seen them help out before.

As I paced around the living room wondering what to do with myself, Force called out to me from where he was lying on the sofa.

“What's this? Don't you have training today?”

He knew I went out with Jin around this time every day, so his curiosity had probably gotten the better of him.

“Jin has errands to run today.”

“Lucky break.”

Seemingly satisfied, Force settled back down. It didn't feel right just to let the conversation die there, though. Since I was already worrying over what to do today, I decided to ask Force for advice. Even if he was a lout, he was an extremely skilled swordsman.

“Speaking of, Force, do you know of any training that you can do solo? I'm kind of at a loss with Jin gone...”

I couldn't practice evasive arts by myself, and I'd already spent the morning practicing Stealth. I wanted a change of pace.

“Why're you asking me? Thieves and swordsmen train in totally different ways, so my tips and tricks would be lost on you,” he said, shooting me down promptly.

Not that I'd expected much in the first place. I figured I would give up on him and go quietly practice Stealth some more.

“Hey, wait a minute. You've been sparring with Jin recently, right? To learn evasive arts?” he suddenly sat up and asked, an impish grin on his face. “Why not spar with me instead?”

“Huh?!”

I had a bad feeling about this and dubiously stepped back. Force would never make an offer like that if there weren't something in it for him. He had to be scheming.

His proposal was tempting, however. I wanted to agree, but the alarm sounding in my head warned of danger. I decided to follow my instincts on this one.

“I appreciate the offer, Force, but I get the feeling you're up to something. I'll have to pass.”

“What's that supposed to mean?! I'm trying to be nice here! Do you really think I'm so untrustworthy?”

“Honestly? Yeah.”

“Hey, you could soften that blow a little, buddy! There’s no need for that kind of brutal honesty!”

“But I’m not kidding. It really seems like you’re up to something.”

“No way! This is honest-to-goodness, 100 percent out of the kindness of my heart!”

Little did he realize that his insistence was actually making him *more* suspicious.

“Does anyone really do anything ‘100 percent’ out of kindness? I mean, a certain degree of self-interest is involved in any—”

“What are you on about now? Do you want help training or not?!”

“Oh, that’s right. You got us so far off topic that I’d forgotten about that.”

“And now you’re blaming *me*? ”

Force was so worked up, I couldn’t help messing around with him a bit. I’d had my fun, however, so I decided it was time to get down to business.

“Since you’re so insistent, I guess I’ll take your word for it. So, would you mind helping me train today?”

“Yeah... Sure thing...” My one-eighty seemed to bewilder Force, who scratched his head in puzzlement. “Y’know, Note, I feel like I haven’t been getting a lot of respect from you lately...”

Of course not. Are you kidding me? Considering what Force had put me through... All those times he’d mocked me and all that running off at the mouth about leaving the party...

Still, I had to concede that *maybe* I’d overdone it a little recently. Force was a veteran adventurer, and certainly far more skilled than I was. I’d have to rethink how I treated him.

“Ha! You fell for it, Note! I’ve been waiting this entire time to catch you alone! Now that I’ve got you, I challenge you to a duel! Let’s duke it out over Roslia!”

That was how Force greeted me when we arrived in the clearing where I trained with Jin. He drew his sword and declared war on me. I watched the whole thing clutching my head.

How could I fall for such an obvious trap?! What an idiot! Am I stupid?!

Force didn’t have a drop of kindness in him. Like hell he’d done this without an ulterior motive.

“I was a fool for trusting your bullshit...” I grumbled.

“Hey, did you just...” Force gawked, stiffening in slight surprise. *Yes, of course I did! Who wouldn’t be swearing right now?!*

“For starters,” I said, hoping to stop a pointless confrontation, “Roslia isn’t mine, so there’s nothing to fight over.”

“Tch... Don’t play dumb with me.”

"I'm not. Trust me."

"I hate it, but I've accepted it... Roslia's fallen for you. I know that. But still! I'm not such a pushover that I'd give up on the love of my life so easily! I'm going to defeat you and win Roslia back!"

"Have you heard a word I said?"

It was literally impossible for Roslia to be in love with me. She may act that way, but it was just that—an act. There was nothing for her to like about me in the first place but, more importantly, I was pretty sure she was actively plotting her revenge against me.

Force still didn't know about what had happened with me and Roslia when we were kidnapped by bandits, so he had the wrong idea about our relationship. And while I would've loved nothing more than to clear up that misunderstanding, doing so would mean revealing the whole I-plotted-to-break-Force-and-Roslia-up thing. So I decided to avoid that topic completely.

"What do you even like about Roslia, Force? Even you should be able to tell that she's not who she pretends to be..."

Instead, my plan was to get Force to see the truth about Roslia. Unfortunately for me, however, Force was set in his ways.

He pumped an enthusiastic fist in the air and proudly declared, "Her face and chest!"

Dude, you're the worst! The scum of the earth!

But the fact that he'd picked up on her only good qualities made it all the more frustrating... Roslia's figure flashed through my mind, and I had to mentally slap myself to get the image out of my head.

"So you're willing to fight me to win back a face and a pair of boobs?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," he replied bluntly.

I hardly knew what to say to that. I was utterly taken aback.

"I give up... This is such a huge pain. You can just have her. I wouldn't be caught dead dating Roslia. As long as you stay with the Arrivers, I don't care if you're going out or not. So let's forget about fighting over it, okay?"

I was so sick and tired of this conversation that I just wanted to drop it. For the record, though, I was lying. Of course I cared about Roslia and Force dating! It's not like I had any romantic feelings for Roslia, but seeing her get together with Force would really burn me.

Even if I knew deep down that she didn't really care about me, it would still hurt to watch a cute girl like her go running to another man. I might've been able to accept it if she were interested in Jin. But Force? Over my dead body. I'd rather date Roslia myself than see her with Force.

So, why did I lie if that's really how I felt? Don't make me laugh! I'd never best Force in combat! Ever! That was why I'd chosen the

coward's way out.

"Hey, are you just trying to chicken out 'cause you know you're gonna lose?"

Why is he only insightful at times like this?! Yes, that's exactly what's going on!

"So what? I'll never win against you, so I'm handing Roslia over peacefully! It's called a strategic retreat!"

"How can you say such wussy things with such gusto? Then, I guess let's just spar so you can practice evasive arts. I'll hold back so I don't really hurt you."

"That would be great! Thanks!"

"You sure change your tune fast... Whatever. Let's just fight already."

Thus, at last, we finally agreed to a match. I rarely got to go up against anyone other than Jin, so I was grateful for the opportunity. I took a few steps away from Force, until I was an appropriate distance back.

Meanwhile, Force wrapped a cord around his hilt and sheath so that he couldn't draw his blade. I similarly prepared myself, putting a hand on my dagger. I lowered my center of gravity and prepared to dodge whatever Force might throw at me. In response, he put his left hand on his sword.

We both glared at each other... But the swordsman poised to strike made the first move.

"Flash Draw!"

There was a creaking thud in my solar plexus—an impact. I suddenly couldn't breathe. I was overcome with a strange sense of weakness before the pain hit me, seizing control of my body from me. I flew through the air like a ragdoll.

It felt like Force had stabbed me in the stomach. But, virtually paralyzed, I couldn't do anything other than wonder what in the world had just happened while I waited to hit the ground.

"You really are weak, Note."

"Shut up..."

My sparring match with Force was over in a flash. It took me longer to recover than it did to fight him. He'd gone easy on me, so I wasn't seriously hurt. Not physically, anyway. The damage to my ego was pretty lethal.

Yet again, I hadn't been able to evade even a single hit. My defeat was absolute. I literally couldn't lift a finger against him. The difference between us was so overwhelming that it wasn't even really fair to call it a fight.

"I just can't dodge you or Jin..." I said, the words unwittingly

slipping my lips.

I surprised even myself. The continuous days of stagnant practice had clearly taken a toll on me. I hadn't realized it, but that was truly how I felt—like I couldn't overcome Jin's Shadow Runner or Force's swift sword.

I'd made leaps and bounds in my training when I could see my progress, but this was tough in a completely different way. I felt aimless. I felt like I was running in place with no clue where I was supposed to be going. It was like trying to find something you didn't know you were looking for. I was putting my all into my training—I just wasn't getting anywhere.

Even Force, who normally mocked me at every opportunity, took pity.

"Yeah, I think it's probably impossible to evade us without using some kind of art."

Rare was a word of advice from his mouth. But in spite of his kindness, my bitterness got the better of me.

"I don't need you to tell me that. We're sparring so I *can* learn evasive arts, remember? The problem is that I can't dodge a single attack. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Hmm, so that's it," Force said with a pensive nod. "It's like the chicken and the egg conundrum."

"What?"

I had no idea what he was getting at, but he took the initiative to explain before I could ask.

"Which comes first: the evasion or the art?" he asked, lifting two fingers. "There are two ways to learn arts, you know."

"There are?"

"That's right. The first way is what you're trying to do now. By honing your instincts and refining your technique with a specific skill, you can naturally pick up the associated arts."

"You mean like how I'm trying to learn evasive arts by learning to dodge?"

"Exactly. Now, as for the second method..." Force said, folding one of his fingers. "The second method is how you're training Stealth: by practicing the art directly. It doesn't matter if you try to copy someone else or get a feel for doing it on your own. Either way, you're experiencing the art firsthand for yourself. If you don't have the instinct or technique to learn arts the first way, this one can be faster. Jin's clever, so he probably did it the first way himself—which is why he's trying to teach you that way. But I think you should choose whichever suits you."

Force's earnest advice stunned me. I could only blink in astonishment as he continued with a smile.

“What I’m saying is that you might actually have an easier time learning evasive arts by watching Jin and imitating him instead.”

Force actually... seemed kind of cool in the moment. Suddenly feeling bashful, however, I reflexively reverted to joking around with him.

“What’s wrong, Force? You’re making sense for once. Did you hit your head or something?”

“How rude! I’m giving you proper advice for once here!”

“See? Even you said ‘for once’!”

“Got me there!” he said, suddenly ducking his head and looking away. “Despite how I may act, I’m actually grateful... I know you went through a lot for my sake when I quit the party. So I’m just, y’know, trying to return the favor.”

I almost choked on my own tongue. Did this mean he knew? That I schemed to break him and Roslia up? I guess that made sense... There was no keeping it from him forever. It wasn’t something I’d actively been trying to hide, so it wasn’t like I’d asked anyone else to keep it a secret. Force wasn’t *that* stupid either, so he was bound to put it together eventually.

“What are you acting all shy for, Force? You caused us all a lot of trouble, sure, but I’m not holding it against you. If anything, I’m still in your debt for agreeing to let me into the party.”

“What’s with that... Argh, enough already! This is too embarrassing. I’m not cut out for serious conversations like this! I said what I needed to say, and that’s that!” Force declared, jabbing a finger at me. Now that he’d finally gotten everything off of his chest, his expression was bright. “Oh, and you can take back what you said about letting me have Roslia. You don’t need to give up on her just ‘cause I’ll kick your ass. I’ll win her for myself, fair and square.”

I *really* wasn’t after Roslia, but...

“G-Good for you. Do your best.”

Nevertheless, I couldn’t bring myself to knock the wind out of his sails now. I took the hand he offered as I got back to my feet. In the moment, I felt like I could sort of see why Jin accepted Force as the leader of the Arrivers. He had a cool side after all, just like a party leader should.

“You bet! I can’t wait to win her over and get my hands on those big titties!”

Okay, I take it all back. Force is a giant loser.

Stealth and Evasion Arts

I found myself recalling the advice Force gave me yesterday: *“You might actually have an easier time learning evasive arts by watching Jin and imitating him.”* It had stuck with me, perhaps because he’d actually said something serious for once. For my sake, no less. It was like his own little way of rooting for me. If I didn’t accept that consideration, I was sure karma would bite me for it later.

Thus, I kept his words in mind as I carefully observed Jin.

We were currently in the middle of clearing floor 7. It was a rocky area with unstable footing that crumbled easily, sending rocks tumbling down the cliffside. Magma bubbled at the bottom, incinerating any debris unfortunate enough to fall into it. The burning crimson light it emitted seared my eyes. I could no longer tell the difference between red and green. My head hurt.

It wasn’t just the scenery that had me in a daze, however. It was hot. Ridiculously hot. The very air I breathed singed my lungs. My exposed neck and face were throbbing in pain. Neme had activated a protective spell to keep us safe—without it, we would’ve burned alive.

This floor was structured like the interior of an active volcano. It was a maze of caves and rocky, narrow passageways. One misstep in any direction could plunge you into the magma pool below—a fall that not even Force or Jin would survive. The threat of death loomed heavy here. The true challenge of floor 7 was surviving the harsh conditions, both mentally and physically.

But I wasn’t going to let that distract my attention from Jin. I had to watch him and learn his moves.

“Withdraw.”

He took a step back from a golem as it spewed red steam in every direction. And the moment the steam seemed to stop...

“Blink.”

Jin closed the distance in a single step. It was like a high-speed game of push and pull; he went from defense to offense in a split second. The golem tried to retaliate with a swift punch, but...

“Stream.”

Jin evaded the golem’s fist with a sidestep. There was less than an arm’s length between them, but these close quarters were no obstacle for Jin.

He swiftly drew his sword from his back and swung it as the fist

sailed past him. No, it wasn't a proper swing... merely a flick of his wrist. But with Mineral Shapeshifting, that was enough. Between a quick snap and the shifting force of his blade, Jin had all the power he needed to cleave the core of the golem neatly in two.

Jin then pulled his black sword from the defeated monster. Its huge, rocky body crashing to the ground snapped me back to reality, breaking me out of my intense focus.

"That should be the last of the monsters in this area," Jin announced.

That meant the fighting was over now, and as such, everyone naturally relaxed a bit. I took a moment to review all of Jin's tricks.

He'd used three arts in the battle just now. The first was Withdraw, which was an evasive art meant to put distance between a user and their opponent. You simply kicked off the ground with one leg to leap backward, but Jin was a skillful assassin. He could leap farther than any normal adventurer. Moreover, he could activate the art at the drop of a hat, using it even while he was off-balance.

The second art he'd demonstrated was Blink. This one technically wasn't an evasive art, as it was the exact opposite of Withdraw; Blink was meant to close the distance on an opponent. It was a combat staple for thieves and thief-based classes, who used it to get to an enemy and strike quickly. And while it wasn't specifically meant for evasion, it could also be used to get out of the way of an attack in a pinch.

The third and final art Jin had used was Stream, which was used to avoid an incoming attack and throw off your opponent. There were two variations of it. The first was what Jin had used, where you simply evaded the attack. The second involved making contact with the enemy in order to parry their blow instead. Both created an opportunity to counterattack, which was the real goal of the art.

Thieves had plenty of other options when it came to counterattacking, including more common arts like Deflect. Jin almost exclusively relied on Stream, however, which was notoriously difficult to learn. It was just another testament to his talent, and that was only the tip of the iceberg. Jin could use a wide variety of other arts, including the evasive arts Sinking Walk and Phantom, the scaling art Climb, and the chain attack art Backslide. He'd mastered each one to perfection, making Jin the ultimate assassin.

I used my sleeve to wipe the sweat beading on my forehead from all the heat and all the concentrating. I then went for the canteen in my bag and took a nice long swig. As I did, I could hear someone call out to me...

"Oh, I'm parched too. Give me a sip."

It was Roslia. I was carrying her canteen too, so I tossed it to her.

For some reason, however, she looked disappointed.

“I would’ve been happy to use yours, Note...”

“I wouldn’t have.”

Yeah, yeah. I know it’s childish to be bothered by something like an indirect kiss, but cut me some slack here.

Something suddenly caught my attention from the corner of my eye... and I turned to see Erin openly glaring at me. What was she so mad about? It wasn’t like I was *trying* to flirt with Roslia... Okay, so maybe I was enjoying myself a little bit. But Roslia was the one who started this, so glare at her instead! I was dying to give Erin a piece of my mind, but an argument would just get messy.

Just ignore her... Pretend like nothing happened...

The problem was that if I didn’t do anything at all, Roslia would take the opportunity to escalate things. And so I decided to try to change the subject...

“A-Anyway, this item bag sure is handy, huh?” I said in an unwittingly monotone voice.

Even I was surprised at how awkward I was. Thankfully, however, Jin was gracious enough to continue the strained conversation naturally.

“Come to think of it, you’ve never used an item bag before, have you, Note?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

I placed a hand over the leather bag tied around my waist. Only Neme and I were carrying them. Why, you ask? Because we only had two to go around.

Item bags, you see, are magic tools capable of negating a certain amount of mass and weight within them. They can’t be used to store living things, and the exact capacity varies from bag to bag. There’s no way of making them, however—they can only be found within dungeons. Because of that, the demand for them far exceeds the available supply and they command an especially high price on the market. I’d heard that selling one item bag would net you enough coin to buy an entire house.

Needless to say, they were a rare find even in the shops of Puriff where dungeon items were commonplace. Even the Arrivers only had two of them. No, I shouldn’t say “only.” Two item bags was a huge deal. The Arrivers had to be rolling in capital, though I guess that’s normal for top-tier parties...

Anyway, Neme and I were entrusted with the party’s two item bags because we were the two members who wouldn’t be participating in combat directly. We were carrying food and water, spare weapons, specialty items, and miscellaneous supplies. I had camping gear for longer trips as well. I was also picking up loot we found along the

way.

When I thought about the kind of trouble we'd be in if I ever misplaced this bag, it sent a cold chill up my back... which was actually quite welcome in this sweltering heat.

While I was distracted, however, Roslia took the opportunity to approach me again.

"Could you hand me a towel, Note?"

I was carrying most of her equipment, so of course she had to come to me for it... But I was feeling a little wary after our last exchange. Granted, that wasn't a good enough reason *not* to give it to her, so I fished out a towel and obediently handed it over.

"Here."

She gratefully took it and wiped her forehead. As our paladin and tank, Roslia wore heavier armor than the rest of us. She was probably feeling the heat more because of it. At least, it sure looked that way based on how much she was sweating. She wiped her face and neck, then reached inside her shirt to wipe her chest. Even her black innerwear was soaked.

"Say, Note, could you help me wipe my back? I can't reach it."

And there was the bombshell. Roslia handed me her sweat-dampened towel and started peeling away her collar in the back...

This had to be crossing a line. I couldn't stick my hands down a girl's shirt, even if it was just to wipe her back.

Roslia, on the other hand, seemed unfazed. She lowered her head and lifted her hair, exposing the nape of her neck. I could see droplets running across her skin, and the faint scent of sweat tickled my nose. It wasn't exactly a sweet scent, but it was intoxicating. There was something strangely alluring about it.



“I’m so hot... Please, Note...”

I froze when I heard those words. Wh-What was with her erotic tone?! She was doing this on purpose, wasn’t she?!

Yeah, she had to be. I mean, there was nothing erotic about this. I was just going to wipe the sweat off her back. No funny business. There was no way helping out a party member could be misconstrued as anything sexual. In fact, I was pretty sure *I* was the weird one for thinking about it so hard.

As a support member of this party, it was my responsibility to assist my fellow members. That’s right. It was my job to lend Roslia a hand. I took a step closer to her, reaching out for her neckline. The closer I got, the stronger her enticing scent became.

Wait, no! This is definitely crossing a line! Why else would I be getting so worked up over it?!

I gave up. It was impossible for me to stick my hands down a woman’s shirt without a single dirty thought. I was agonizing over the issue when an unexpected savior stepped in and saved me...

“Oh, babe, let me do that for you! I’m happy to wipe down your back—and the rest of you, if you want!”

“That’s fine,” Roslia said, snatching the towel back. “I’ll do it myself.”

I wanted to thank Force, but...

That was totally sexual harassment just now, dude.

After we cleared floor 7, I went straight to the forest clearing where I usually trained with Jin. I wanted to review the arts I’d seen him use before I forgot them. Like Force had suggested, I was going to try to learn directly through imitation. Since I couldn’t seem to learn by honing my senses, this was all I could do.

“Now, which art should I start with? There’s no way I can imitate everything I saw Jin do...”

Of all the arts I’d witnessed him use today, the evasive ones were Withdraw, Stream, Sinking Walk, and Phantom. And the simplest one of the lot was...

“Withdraw, I guess?”

Jin used it fairly often, so it had to be good. And unlike arts like Stream that were used situationally in response to incoming attacks, I could even practice Withdraw by myself.

“All right, let’s do this.”

Today, I’d start down the long road to learning my very first evasive art.

Training and an Unexpected Incident

I enjoy taking baths about as much as the next guy. I know there are people who love baths, even bath fanatics who revere it as some kind of organic, cleansing experience that we're meant to enjoy on an instinctual level. But me? I take issue with this.

Don't get the wrong idea, though. It's not like I don't bathe or anything unhygienic like that. In fact, I make sure to take a bath every day. But is it fun? Is it something we really do for pleasure? This is the bone I'd like to pick. Frankly, I think baths are kind of exhausting.

Simply sinking into steaming water can be enough to sap your strength, and I disliked the lightheadedness that followed a hot bath. That was why I considered bathing more of a chore than anything. I was opposed to the idea that it was some form of relaxation.

But, of course, there are exceptions to everything. Even I could admit that a leisurely soak felt nice once in a while. Perhaps it was the fatigue from consecutive days of dungeon diving and training, but something had convinced me tonight was a good night for a bath.

That, however, turned out to be a terrible mistake. I'm sure you bath-lovers out there must think this was some kind of comeuppance for a bath-hater like me... but I had no idea what to do as I watched Neme wash herself off, preparing for her bath.

Needless to say, she was stark naked. She wasn't even wrapped in a towel... So, yeah, I got an eyeful of Neme in her birthday suit. Moreover, she hadn't actually realized I was here. She was still preparing to get in the bath and hadn't come over to the tub yet.

So, in short, right now... I was in mortal danger. The greatest predicament of my life.

But let me be clear. This wasn't on purpose. This wasn't some pervy scheme of mine. I had an inkling as to how it had happened, however. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just a tragedy resulting from a confluence of unfortunate coincidences.

The first was simply that I was dead tired. That was why, after all, I'd decided to relax in the bath for once. And what usually happens when you unwind in the bath when you're beat? Obviously, you doze off. That's right. I'd fallen asleep in the bath.

Fortunately, the silver lining here was that I hadn't drowned in the process. I'd heard stories of less fortunate folks, and I didn't particularly want to be remembered as that one lame Arriver who

bought the farm in the bath.

Now, the second unfortunate coincidence was that I had been using Stealth. In order to advance my training, I'd recently taken to practicing Stealth whenever possible—and today was no exception. I kept Stealth active at all times, which brings us to our third unfortunate coincidence...

It seemed I'd gotten much better with Stealth than I'd realized. Using it constantly had improved my proficiency with it dramatically. I was at the point where Neme and Erin had trouble detecting me when I used it. And since I used it at all times, I had—apparently—acquired the ability to keep it up even while I was asleep.

I'd only discovered that just now, however, and I could honestly say this was the first time I wasn't thrilled to reach such a benchmark achievement. I didn't care about arts right now. I just wanted out of here.

At any rate, it seemed Stealth was the reason Neme hadn't noticed me. She didn't so much as glance my way as she carefully washed between her toes, humming to herself happily. But just because I hadn't been spotted yet didn't mean I was safe.

Let me repeat myself: Neme was washing between her toes. That meant she was mostly done washing off and she was down to the finishing touches.

To be honest, I had woken up while she was still washing her hair, but I'd thought I was dreaming at first. *What an awful dream to have. I'll have to apologize to Neme later. I hope this doesn't say anything about me.* Such thoughts occupied my mind as I gradually came to a horrific realization: I wasn't dreaming. When it hit me, my mind came to a grinding halt and the panic set in. Neme was nearly done washing herself and I was out of time.

She'd be coming to get in the bath any second now. Once that happened, my nice life with the Arrivers would be all over.

Even though I had Stealth activated, Neme was sure to notice me as soon as she walked over to the bathtub. My only hope would be if she decided to leave after washing off instead of taking a bath.

“Ba-Ba-Bath time, bath time! Yay, yay, hooray!”

Okay, I was screwed... She was *definitely* intent on getting in the bath. Heck, she was even singing about it now.

This is it. Goodbye, Arrivers.

I could see it now. I was going to be branded a pervert and chased out of HQ, run out into the street to live as an outcast for the rest of my days. But I'll stand my ground on this: I don't see Neme in a sexual way. Nuh-uh. I may have been silently hiding in the bathtub as I watched her, but it wasn't a pervy thing. I was only trying to keep my cool and protect myself. I was *not* peeping.

Even if I were desperate, Neme was out of the question. Her childlike figure did nothing for me. The fact that a certain part of my body wasn't reacting right now was proof. Not that there was much point in trying to make excuses for the situation...

I could hear the sound of the shower running now. Neme must be rinsing off the bubbles and suds. The end was nigh. I had maybe a minute left to live.

I'd pretty much resigned myself to my fate at this point. There was no way I could get myself out of this one. Beyond redemption, I simply awaited the inevitable.

I could hear the shower stop, the showerhead clack against the wall. My doom was upon me.

"Bath time, ba-ba-bath time! Time to take a baaath!"

My gaze met Neme's as she dipped her toes into the water.

"..."

Her eyes, completely focused on me, slowly went wide. Her mouth gaped...



And in the moment, my brain instinctively kicked into survival mode. My nervous system was operating at a superhuman pace in a desperate attempt to save me. It was like a fog lifted and it suddenly hit me—there was a way out of this yet!

“Huh? Miss Neme? What are you doing here? Are you... perving on me?”

“W-Wait just a minute! How did you jump to that conclusion?! I-I-I don’t even know what’s happening here!”

“H-Hey, don’t yell like that! Someone’s going to hear you! Do you want the others to find out you’re a pervert?!”

“Neme isn’t a perv—”

“Then pipe down already.”

I grabbed Neme, who had one leg over the edge of the bathtub, and clapped a hand over her mouth. It... probably looked criminal.

“Mmrgh! Mmrf, mmph! C-Can’t breathe! L-Lemme go!”

“Oh, sorry.”

When I realized she was struggling for air, I let go of her mouth. She wheezed as she tried to catch her breath.

“W-Wait just a minute! Why are you calling Neme a pervert? You’re the one who—”

“What? No. You’re clearly the pervert here, Miss Neme. I was in the bathroom first, wasn’t I? You came in even though I was asleep in the tub, which makes *you* the perv who tried to peep on *me*.”

This was my last resort: deflection. It was a desperate plan with minimal chance of success, but...

“O-Oh my gosh... Does this mean I *am* a pervert?”

Piece of cake. You make it too easy, Miss Neme.

“N-No...! I wasn’t...! Neme didn’t...!” she stammered, now in a fluster as she flailed her hands. “N-Neme wasn’t thinking anything dirty! I-I wasn’t trying to see you naked!”

“I know, Miss Neme. I know you’re not that kind of person. It wasn’t on purpose, was it?”

“Note... Thank you for believing in me,” she whispered, taking my hands with tears in her eyes.

She seemed convinced she’d done something wrong and was thus genuinely grateful for my forgiveness. No matter how you looked at it... I was taking advantage of her.

Nevertheless, I was satisfied things had worked out. If it were Erin instead of Neme, I would have been a dead man. She never would’ve entertained such idiocy. And if it had been Roslia, I—or at least my virtue—would have been in jeopardy.

“H-Hey, isn’t this a bit too close?” Neme asked, her face as red as a cooked lobster.

“Huh?”

“I-I’m talking about us! Y-You’re too close!”

Now that you mention it...

In my panic to silence her, I’d grabbed Neme practically in a bear hug. This was definitely crossing a line. I swiftly released her and retreated to the back of the bath. The tub was so small, however, that she was still sitting on my legs. I could feel her baby butt on my shins.

“Um... Miss Neme?” I asked.

“Y-Yes?! What is it?!” she flinched.

“Please stop staring at me.”

“I-I’m not staring!”

“I told you not to yell.”

Neme covered her mouth in a panic. Her face was even redder than before. Instead of a lobster, she was now the color of the flame that had boiled it.

“Please don’t make too much noise, Miss Neme. We really don’t want the other party members finding out about this.”

“I only yelled because you said something weird!”

Whose fault was that, really? She’d been staring at me for a while now. I won’t say where, exactly, but you can probably guess. And sure enough... I watched her pupils drift downward again before shooting back up to look me in the eye.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!” she insisted.

“Ugh, whatever...”

I’d seen more than enough of Neme’s naked body to make a fuss about it, honestly. Besides, I figured she was probably looking out of curiosity more than anything. We’d found out the night Roslia joined the party that she had no experience with men, after all.

“M-More importantly!” she said loudly, looking away conspicuously. “When did you wake up?”

“While you were washing your hair.”

“That long ago?! You should have said something sooner!”

“I blanked out for a bit since I didn’t know what to do.”

I proceeded to explain to Neme why I was in the bath and why she hadn’t noticed me in the first place. She listened to my story intently before saying anything else.

“Doesn’t this mean you’re also partly to blame, Note?”

“Well, I do feel bad about it...”

I mean, it was about 90 percent my fault. I had been careless.

“So, if you don’t mind, get out of here already, Miss Neme.”

I tried to wrap things up with that. But Neme, who was still sitting on my legs, just looked at me like she had no idea what I was saying.

“Why do I have to leave? Shouldn’t you? Neme still hasn’t gotten to enjoy a bath yet!”

“Think about it. Wouldn’t it be weird if I left the bathroom after you entered it? It would definitely raise eyebrows, so you have to leave first!”

“But that means I don’t get to have a bath! I’d have to leave and come back, and that would be even weirder!”

“So have some self-control and don’t come back.”

“No! Neme’s gotta have her bath!”

Ah, I see... So there’s a bath fanatic here among the Arrivers.

“Then what do you propose we do, Miss Neme? Do you want me to just wait here until you finish your bath?”

“Yeah!”

“What? I’ll be all dizzy and lightheaded by then...”

How long had I been in the bath already? At least an hour must have elapsed by now.

“Neme will fix you right up with healing magic, so don’t worry!” she declared, raising her tiny fists triumphantly.

Wait, Neme was okay with this? Bathing with me? Well, I guess if she didn’t care, neither did I. I certainly didn’t wanna be kicked out...

“All right, let’s just bathe together for a bit then.”

And so our peculiar bath time continued.

*

Bath time disasters aside, the Arrivers were making steady progress through the dungeon. They sure lived up to their reputation as a top-tier party. Force and Jin seemed unbeatable in close range combat—they could even solo certain floor bosses. Erin’s spells burned through entire monster armies, and Neme’s recovery spells kept us all in tip-top shape. Even our newest member, Roslia, was pulling her weight.

That meant the least useful member of the team was—you guessed it—me. I was supposed to be learning evasive arts with Jin right now. Progress had been slow, but I had a new trick up my sleeve today.

“Come at me.”

It sounded like I was trying to provoke my mentor, but I had a plan. I was going to use Withdraw to dodge Jin’s attack for sure. All the time I’d spent practicing it alone had finally come to fruition. Jin didn’t know I was capable of using it yet, however, so I wanted to surprise him. I was hoping I could catch him off guard and finally land a blow against the ultimate assassin.

I gathered my wits and held my dagger at the ready with my right hand in my battle stance. I opened my eyes wide to make sure I wouldn’t miss Jin’s first move, though just seeing him move wouldn’t be enough. To prepare for his attack, I shifted my weight back onto

my right foot a little more than usual. I had to play this cool so Jin didn't notice anything was amiss, but I still had to be ready. It was a precarious game, like trying to fill a cup exactly to its brim without spilling a drop.

Once Jin knew I could use Withdraw, he'd act accordingly in response. I was sure of that. I'd seen enough of him in action to know better. That was why I needed to keep my cards close—this was a surprise attack that would only work once. I wanted to win against Jin that badly.

Quietly, without making a show of it, I slowly and steadily tensed my right calf. I couldn't rush here. And the moment I was ready to spring, Jin opened his mouth.

"Shadow Runner."

Before he could even finish saying those words...

Withdraw!

I had already moved. It would've been too late if I had waited. I couldn't react in time if I let my eyes and ears be my guide. No, I was going off of instinct. The terrifying speed of Jin's attacks had been beaten into me—literally. I placed my full trust in my experience and made a leap for it.

My field of view suddenly pulled back a meter or so. It felt like I was jumping backward into a wall of air—this was the sensation of using Withdraw. For a brief moment, I was certain of my victory. But, oh, how mistaken I was.

Damn...

Jin was right in front of me. But how? What was he doing there? There had to be some sort of mistake. I was sure I'd used Withdraw successfully, so what went wrong? The answer was simple. So simple, in fact, that it was beyond me.

Jin was faster than my Withdraw. That was all. He'd simultaneously activated Shadow Runner and Blink.

His shadow moved so quickly that I couldn't even process it. It was like he vanished instantly. The next thing I knew, he was grabbing my neck from behind. He'd caught me even as I was doing everything in my power to get away from him.

And that was all she wrote for me. Jin proceeded to use Stream to redirect the momentum of my Withdraw downward. I was in the dirt before I had any idea what was happening.

"I give."

It was all I could do to graciously accept my defeat. I lay prone, raising my arms in surrender. Losing so spectacularly was actually kind of refreshing. How strange.

"Nice one, Note. I wasn't expecting an evasive art from you so soon."

Jin's praise didn't quite ring true after he'd schooled me like that. I'd spent so long training just to get my butt handed to me. I'd known that was a possibility all along, but it was still a shock to go through it. Apparently humans resort to laughter when they don't know how else to respond, as I was chuckling before I knew it.

"Even though you still caught me?" I asked.

"I actually had to try a little that time, though," Jin replied, scratching his head bashfully.

If he'd merely tried "a little," then I could only imagine what he was capable of at full power. It wouldn't mean anything to dodge Jin's attacks as long as he was going easy on me. I wanted to beat him at his best, despite knowing that he was my superior in every way. That was my wish, even if it was a pipe dream. I didn't have any combat skills. I didn't have any talent, either. But a nobody like me had made it into the Arrivers. It was only natural that I wanted to fight alongside Jin as an equal.

That was why the crushing reality I faced—the difference in our skill—weighed on me so heavily. What I was doing wasn't working. It wasn't enough. I had to train more. I had to work harder.

My Withdraw was too slow. It wasn't precise enough either. I was too easy to catch like this. Moreover, I realized now that Withdraw alone wouldn't be enough. I couldn't evade Jin's attacks like this. I needed to learn the next art quickly.

So even though I felt like I'd made some progress, my to-do list was only getting longer.

A Strange Town at Night

It had now been four months since Roslia joined the party. With our newfound strength, the Arrivers continued clearing floors with ease. We'd made it to our goal of floor 16 before I knew it. The whole process was so smooth and painless that it was almost anticlimactic. Reaching floor 16 was a tremendous feat that most parties in Puriff had yet to achieve, so I was a little taken aback by how effortlessly it came to us.

At least... that was how I felt until I realized I had no right to say "us." I'd barely participated in combat along the way; the party simply carried me to floor 16. That gave me pause. I had no desire to be the kind of adventurer who made their name off the hard work of others, so I couldn't pat myself on the back for their achievements. I knew I didn't deserve any credit for how far we'd gotten—I didn't want it. I didn't want to be that kind of shameless person.

"This place is really creepy..." Force grumbled.

We were currently several minutes into exploring floor 16, which was set up like a town. It appeared to be nighttime, and the entire place was shrouded in a foreboding silence. It felt like merely talking in a normal voice might attract unwanted attention.

"It's like a ghost town," I said quietly.

The houses and buildings were tightly packed together, but there was no sign of life anywhere. There were streetlamps, but no pedestrians. There weren't any carriages or other vehicles around, either. Moreover, the paved streets were spotless. Not a speck of rubbish in sight. There's no way any functional town would ever be this pristine.

"Right?" Force said, placing his hand on the door of a nearby house. It swung open without any resistance.

"Hey, don't go opening random doors. That's dangerous. You never know what's behind them," I scolded.

"Whatever. If anything jumps out at me, I'll just cut it down. Besides, you said there weren't any monsters hiding around here."

"That's true, but..."

It was still too careless. It was always possible there were monsters I couldn't detect with Enemy Search. Thankfully, Jin was on my side.

"I agree with Note," he said. "This is our first time on floor 16. We

should be especially careful now that we've hit a new difficulty bracket."

This was something Jin had mentioned to me before. Everyone knew that the dungeon got harder the further you progressed, but there was also a noticeable uptick in the difficulty every five floors. So since we'd just arrived on floor 16, we could expect it to be exponentially tougher than floor 15... Not that I could really imagine Jin and the others struggling with whatever it had to throw at us.

We took the time to look around inside a few of the houses. They were furnished, but oddly devoid of smaller articles like clothing and tableware. As I was pondering this, Jin called out to me.

"When you use Mapping, do any of these houses look weird or stand out to you?"

"Layout-wise, they seem like regular houses. There aren't any hidden passageways or anything. Looking at them with my own two eyes, though... they're really bizarre."

Mapping provided me with a detailed view of my surroundings, including the layout of any buildings in the area. It would actually be a pretty good skill... if only it didn't take up three slots. I found myself thinking that a lot lately.

"There aren't any monsters in the other houses either, right?" Jin asked.

"Right," I said with a nod. "The monsters are all on the road a short distance ahead."

Floors 16 and beyond were uncharted territory for the Arrivers. That meant it was finally time for me to show my stuff and put Mapping to use. My only job so far had been using Enemy Search and Trap Detection, so I was honestly thrilled to be playing my part at last.

"It should be easier to fight outdoors, so let's go ahead and engage the monsters. I'd like to get an idea of what the enemies are like on this floor," Jin suggested.

Of course, no one objected. Jin was the de facto tactician of the party, and everyone followed his lead. So, with that, we all exited the creepy house.

After that, we left the clustered residential area and found our way to the main street. Rather than houses, it was lined with little shops and market stalls.

"Oh, looky! They're stocked!" Neme declared, running over to one of them.

Here yet another party member was carelessly rushing into action, but I'd grown tired of trying to stop them. I just kept my mouth shut. I could tell thanks to Enemy Search that there were no monsters around, so I figured things would be fine. In the worst case scenario,

Jin would always intervene.

The tented stall Neme ran over to had a banner with a painted design that twisted and turned in a thin line. Was it letters? No matter how hard I tried to read it, I couldn't make it out.

"It says 'Mare Mart,'" Erin announced as she walked up.

"Huh? What does?"

"Uh, the sign you were staring at just now?"

"Really? That actually says something? Wait, how come you can read it?!"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"It's really not..."

What part of that is obvious, exactly? I mean, come on, Erin. Use your big girl words. I eyed our silver-haired mage suspiciously.

"Oh no! Don't tell me, Erin... Are you actually a monster that grew up here in the dungeon?!"

"Shut up! Don't make up a backstory for me! I said it was *obvious* because a top-tier mage like me can *obviously* read dungeon script!"

"Dungeon script?" I parroted, unwittingly repeating the unfamiliar phrase.

"Ugh. Of course you don't even know about that..." Erin replied with an exasperated sigh.

I was a little irritated by her tone, but I let it slide. I was more interested in hearing about this so-called dungeon script. Erin was right, after all. Of course I didn't know anything about the dungeon or magic.

I grew up in a tiny town where the idea of exploring the rampant dangers of dungeons myself was just a far-off dream. That was something only the bravest and most eccentric adventurers ever dared to attempt. It was a completely unknown world for me. The same went for magic.

Changs was small enough that there were no magic schools, tutors, or institutions. I was oblivious about it. I only knew two things. The first was that Erin used it. The arcane spells she wielded were true magic, whereas the divine spells Roslia and Neme used were technically just holy arts.

The second thing I knew was that you had to learn magic, which either required a ton of money or luck. People who wanted to become mages generally started studying at a very early age. Acquiring magic was an extensive and involved process; it certainly wasn't something that happened overnight. Starting young made it easier to learn spells and increase one's mana pool—both of which were key for mages. That meant in order to be a successful mage, you either had to be lucky enough to have mages for parents or be rich enough to afford magic schooling.

People also said that studying magic while you were young increased your chances of getting magic-relevant skills. The same was true for nonmagical skills as well. They said that anything you did before the age of fifteen influenced the skills you drew. I'd casually trained with the sword... so why the hell had I ended up with Mapping, of all things?!

I guess, to be fair, the influence you could have on your skills was only marginal. Really, there were lots of anomalous cases like mine.

At any rate, I'd never had any experience with magic, so Erin's words were especially intriguing to me. She had my full attention.

"Dungeon script is the language you see throughout the dungeon."

"Is that what you call an explanation, Professor Erin?"

"Oh, just shut up and listen."

"Yes, Professor!"

"..."

What, no reaction? Come on...

"The writing throughout the dungeon will tell you all kinds of things. It can be simple information like what floor you're on, or valuable hints about how to progress. Sometimes there are even rare explanations of spells and arts."

"Why is all of that written inside the dungeon?"

"That's what the Magical Society is trying to find out. The most prominent theory right now is that whoever created the dungeons left messages behind to help humanity conquer them—which is why some people believe it was God."

Erin had turned on the information faucet like she was trying to flood me out. What even was the Magical Society? You gotta explain this stuff! Don't just bombard me with jargon! I bet Erin would be the type of teacher that students would complain about behind her back. "Her lectures are too difficult to understand," they'd say. I guess I was at fault for derailing her, though...

"Are you even listening to me, Note?!"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then, you see, mages study dungeon script because—"

"Ah, you don't have to explain that part. I think I got that already. You study it to learn what's recorded about spells in the dungeon, right?"

I was growing bored of the classroom act. My initial curiosity had long been quashed by Erin's long-winded explanation. Meanwhile, however, she seemed to be getting more and more into it.

"Let's see," she said, humming pensively to herself. "What's next, then?"

Okay, yeah. Class time with Professor Erin is over...

"Hey, uh, Neme! Anything over there in that shop?" I called out to

our dwarf priestess.

“Huh? Wait a minute, Note—”

I ignored Erin and crossed the street. Neme frenetically waved me over.

“Come look at this! Come see, everyone! They only have carrots!” she exclaimed.

Huh? Is she serious?

The rest of us went over to investigate, and sure enough...

“They really do only have carrots,” Jin commented as he picked up one of the orange vegetables on display. More of them were stocked in the back.

“Guess we won’t be hurting for food on this floor,” Force added as he picked up one himself.

“If that’s all there is to eat, I think I’m going to get pretty tired of carrots,” I quipped.

“You never know, Note!” Roslia suddenly chimed in.

“What?” I asked wearily.

“Erin might be able to spice things up so you don’t get tired of them! She’s got *Minor Cooking*, after all!”

Hey! You’re definitely trying to goad Erin, aren’t you?! You even put unnecessary emphasis on the “Minor” part! Great... Now she’s glaring at me. Thanks, Roslia! You made it sound like I was bad-mouthing her when I didn’t even say anything!

Roslia joining the party effectively doubled the number of Arrivers who liked to tease Erin. As a result, she was in a perpetually bad mood these days. I didn’t even know how to salvage the situation.

“Look over there! That one’s full of them too!”

Oblivious to my dilemma, Neme ran over to another stall. We all followed her, unsurprised to see that it too was loaded with carrots.

“What’s with this floor? It’s seriously giving me the creeps,” Erin muttered, giving voice to what we were all thinking.

We’d gone around to several more stalls, all of which were stocked with nothing but carrots. There wasn’t anything else for sale in sight. I was starting to get a little sick of the color orange, honestly. It almost felt like someone had thrown this floor together in a slapdash fashion, filling all the stalls with the same thing.

Erin had brought up the theory that the dungeons were divinely made earlier, but I had my doubts. Shouldn’t God have been able to make a better town than this, after all? Maybe God wasn’t actually all-powerful...

“We’ll be encountering the monsters soon, so get ready,” I said as a reminder for myself as much as the rest of the party.

There were ten presences less than a hundred meters ahead,

roughly two streets away. Ten was a bit on the high side, so there was a possibility these were swarming monsters. Their threat levels were identical, meaning there was likely no variation in their strength or species.

“They haven’t noticed us yet, but I think we should advance and try fighting them. Are we all okay with that?” Jin asked.

Everyone agreed, and so we made our move.

We slipped into an alleyway that intersected the street the monsters were traveling down. The plan was to stake out the area and wait for them to arrive before we engaged. To get an initial look at our enemies, Jin activated Stealth and stuck his head around the corner.

“What in the world...?” he muttered.

His inarticulate reaction piqued Neme’s interest, so she whined about wanting to see too. With no other choice, I placed my hand on her shoulder and activated Stealth for us.

“They’re horses...”

“...Walking on two legs.”

“Wow, really descriptive, you two,” Erin complained, seemingly dissatisfied with our reactions as well.

Just wait till you see this, Erin. That’s the only way to describe them.

“What are we dealing with?” she asked.

“They’re horsemen!” Neme replied immediately.

“What the heck are horsemen?!”

“It’s a name Neme just made up!”

“You suck at names, then!”

Erin was fighting a losing battle here. I had to agree with Neme 100 percent. “Horsemen” was a perfect name for these guys. I was sure Erin would come to her senses when she saw them for herself.

“All right, let’s start the ambush,” Jin said.

On his signal, all six of us jumped out from the alley.

“Ah! They really are horsemen!” Erin clamored.

See? Told you.

Jin took the lead in our assault. He used Climb to run against gravity and dash up the side of a building. He then leaped from it, beheading two horsemen as he landed. His attack was so flawless that I thought this floor was going to be easy street. The other Arrivers seemed to relax a little too.

That is, until a horseman at the back of the herd blew the whistle around its neck.

Fweeeeet!

The shrill screech startled us all.

The horsemen didn’t attack, however. They simply readied their spears and held their ground. They were on the defensive.

“It’s a signal! That whistle is a call for reinforcements!” I cried in a panic.

Thanks to Enemy Search, I could tell that an immense number of monsters were now headed our way. It seemed Jin had sensed the same danger, and he acted accordingly.

“We’re retreating! We can’t afford to get surrounded like this!” he called, swinging his writhing black blade through the legs of the horsemen directly in front of us. He was strategically trying to immobilize them instead of kill them.

Force, who was just behind Jin, turned on his heels and looked at me.

“Note, lead the way!” he shouted.

“Got it!”

Jin and I were the only ones in the group who could use Enemy Search, and Jin had his hands full playing rearguard right now. I also had Mapping at my disposal, which would easily allow me to find an escape route. As such, it seemed our retreat was up to me.

I quickly analyzed our surroundings and picked the path with the fewest monsters. I was aiming to take us deeper into the floor rather than back to the start—I figured that would be better. And so, with our course settled, I took off running.

“I’ll give you directions as we go, Roslia, so please take the lead!”

I was too nervous to lead the charge with zero combat abilities. Even if I tried to pick a route without any monsters at all, I was sure we’d still be in for a few encounters along the way.

“Turn right at that street up ahead!” I yelled with Neme over my shoulder.

In situations like this, it was my duty to protect our healer. All of my morning jogs had been in preparation for this. Behind us, Jin, Force, and Erin took up the rear and kept pace without a problem. I didn’t need to worry about them for now. I just had to focus on getting us to safety.



From the right. From the left. From behind. No matter where we turned, the encroaching monsters were steadily getting closer. It seemed like a fight was inevitable.

“There are three monsters over there! Do something about them!” I called to Roslia.

““Over there”?! What kind of vague direction is that?!” she called back.

“Figure it out!”

“That doesn’t help either!”

Roslia finally spotted the horsemen I was talking about as they emerged from an alleyway. She charged them at full speed. Carefully controlling her momentum, she used her shield to send the first flying. She then spun on the spot and cleaved through the remaining two. The one she’d nailed with a shield bash, however, wasn’t down for the count yet. Slumped against a building, it blew a whistle.

It was apparently signaling for more of its friends. I was immediately aware, courtesy of Enemy Search, that there were now several more horsemen headed our way. It seemed Roslia knew the jig was up too.

“Argh! Not this again!” she groaned, stamping her foot in irritation.

“Just leave that one and keep running!”

“Yeah, sorry... You’re right.”

“Don’t apologize! Just run!”

Roslia shot one last glare at the fallen horseman before taking off.

So the monsters here call for more of their kind...

That was definitely troublesome. We’d never encountered monsters like this before—although I should have expected as much on floor 16. This was going to be a new challenge.

“Erin!” Force called as he ran.

“I know, damn it!” she barked between ragged breaths.

Erin didn’t have much stamina. She might have more than your average adventurer, sure, but she was still a rear-line mage. She was the slowest of the group after Neme, and running like this was hard for her. She was the most fatigued out of all of us, but she was going to have to pull through. Dozens of horsemen were closing in on us from behind.

“Lightning Rush!” she incanted, raising her staff toward the herd.

This was one of her specialty ranged spells. It sent a bolt of lightning through the crowd of horsemen, mowing down all of our pursuers and leveling a few buildings in the process. Her magic was just that powerful. Erin was an incredible mage.

Amid the rubble, however, I could see a few horsemen getting

back up. It seemed her spell wasn't strong enough to eliminate all of them. And once again... that annoying whistle we were all tired of hearing rang out.

"Ugh! There's no end to these guys!" Erin complained, biting her lip as she channeled more magic into her staff.

We left the horsemen she'd missed in the dust and just kept running.

It'd been over half a day now since we first started running from the horsemen. Of course, we hadn't been running this entire time. We took breaks when we could, taking refuge inside the buildings around town. As soon as we were discovered, however, the unfair game of tag—six against hundreds—was back on.

Each individual horseman wasn't a threat to the Arrivers, but their numbers were absolutely overwhelming. If they surrounded us, the defenseless Neme and I would be in dire trouble. It was a precarious situation. There were just too many of them.

There were also different kinds, based on what we'd seen so far. The lightly armored spearmen we'd first encountered were the most common—Neme had dubbed them horse soldiers. Next were horsemen in full suits of heavy armor, or horse knights. They were easy enough to outrun because they were slower than the standard soldiers, though they were considerably tougher. They were the ones who could withstand Erin's spells and call for backup, making them just as much of a pain to deal with. There were also horse mages and horse archers. They were as uncommon as they were dangerous. Each time we ran into one, it gave us trouble. They were basically the rare encounter no one was happy to get.

When I thought about it... it struck me as strange that all of the horsemen were combatants. There didn't seem to be a single horse villager anywhere. That was probably why there hadn't been any signs of life in town. It was just a theory, but I was starting to feel less like the horsemen actually lived here and more like they'd just been placed around the horse-themed town as an afterthought.

"I can see a gate up ahead now. Should we go for it?"

As we moved, my mental map moved with us. We were currently headed deeper into floor 16, and I'd just detected a large gate in the direction we were going. It was right on the edge of my map, meaning it was roughly a kilometer away, and it was embedded in a wall that looked like it divided the floor.

"We can't afford to stick around here," Jin said after a moment's hesitation. "Let's go for it. It might be dangerous though, so stay alert!"

We followed his swift orders, avoiding the main street filled with

clamoring soldiers as we went. We wound our way through a series of back alleys, but were spotted by horsemen several times along the way. Each one blew their whistle, forcing us to change course again.

After multiple detours, however, we eventually arrived at the gate. It was a towering wooden structure that stood several times taller than any of the buildings around us—scaling it was out of the question. Security was rather light, though. A lone horseman stood on either side of the gate. There was some kind of writing above it. Must have been dungeon script.

“It says ‘Mid-Boss Ahead’! What do we do?” Erin shouted.

“Mid-boss?” I asked, reflexively cocking my head.

It was the first I’d ever heard that term. No such thing had appeared on any of the floors before this one.

“I wonder what a mid-boss is...” Jin pondered aloud.

It seemed he was unfamiliar with the term too. The difficulty of the dungeon increased every five floors, and we’d hypothetically just passed the halfway point on floor 15. It was possible mid-bosses would simply be a new challenge on each floor from here on out.

“We shouldn’t waste any more time here. This mid-boss sounds scary, but let’s press on. We’ll have to fight it eventually in order to clear the floor, so—”

“Got it!”

Without even waiting for Jin to finish talking, Erin unleashed a lightning spell on the gate.

You didn’t even try to open it normally. Sure, destroying it might be the easiest way to get through, but... isn’t that a little too muscle-brained?

Needless to say, the wooden gate was blown away along with part of the stone wall around it.

“Let’s go!”

“R-Right...”

A little bewildered by Erin’s gung-ho attitude, I advanced toward the gate with everyone. From what I could see, the next area wasn’t much different. There were houses in neat rows and horsemen filling the streets. They started blowing their whistles as soon as they saw us...

But something unusual happened after that.

A loud neigh thundered through the night from afar, followed by a rumbling tremor that shook the whole town. Something was coming. Something big.

I quickly looked around, and my eyes fell upon a trail of smoke rising from down the road ahead of us. It had to be the mid-boss. It was headed toward us with incredible speed and abandon.

The mid-boss entered the range of my Enemy Search at practically the same time it came into view. There were two black, fire-breathing

horses pulling a horseman in a chariot behind them.

"It's the horse general..." muttered Neme.

I was taken aback by her thought process in the moment, but I knew we couldn't risk sitting around in awe of the mid-boss. We were standing in the middle of the road—right in its path—and I, for one, wasn't interested in getting run over. Our priority now was simply getting off the main street.

I made a beeline for the first alley I happened to spot with the rest of the group in tow. I took a quick headcount to make sure we hadn't lost anyone, then set off running as fast as my legs would carry me. I wanted to put as much distance between us and the chariot as possible.

In a matter of mere seconds, the street behind us was flooded with flames—the fiery aftermath of the mid-boss passing through. Its flaming charge attack burned up everything in its way. The horse trio looked like it was turning around for another pass, too. They made a wide, sweeping loop in order to keep up their charging speed, swinging the chariot into a building as it barreled along. It was clear they were coming after us again—I could tell that much even without Enemy Search. Neme seemed to realize it too.

"Let me down, Note. I'll cast a buff on everyone while I can," she said, smacking my shoulder.

"All right."

At her order, I put her down on the spot. She then slapped herself on the back and raised her staff high.

"Saint's—"

But the second she opened her mouth to chant, fire filled the sky.

One, two, three blazes shot out in quick succession from the chariot in the distance. The flaming cannonballs cut an arc through the air before tumbling down toward us. The unexpected long-range attack brought my mind to a screeching halt. All I could think was...

Shit. We're gonna die. What do we do? What can we do?

Yet while I was frozen, Jin leaped into action. He activated Shadow Runner without hesitation, grabbed Neme who had stepped forward to cast her spell, and then fled the trajectory of the cannonballs.

That was supposed to be my job... Damn.

The instant I realized I'd screwed up, the gears of my stuck mind began turning again. I was already a step behind, so what was my best course of action now?

Should I activate Withdraw? No... I might not make it out of the cannonballs' blast without knowing exactly where they'll land.

Just because I was thinking clearly now didn't mean I was safe. As I tried to come up with a solution in a panic, however, Roslia called

out to me.

“This way, Note!”

I didn’t have time to hesitate. I abandoned all my plans and immediately used Withdraw to leap toward her. She caught me in her arms and pulled me close as she called forth a wall of light.

“Impenetrable Fortress!”

The blazing cannonballs struck her barrier with a roar that shook my eardrums. Fire consumed us.

“Guh...!”

I fearfully opened my eyes, surprised to find I was still alive. One look at Roslia told me she was fine too. Neither of us were even burned. The worst I could say for myself was that my elbow hurt from slamming into Roslia’s armor.

“Wait, why do you have your arms around me?” I asked skeptically.

Impenetrable Fortress was a defensive spell that encircled a certain area with a barrier of light. We were both safely in its range, so there was no need for Roslia to pull me so close.

“You jumped at me, so I acted without thinking...”

Yeah, I bet. I was grateful that she’d protected me, but I reflexively pried myself out of her clinging arms.

“Let’s get out of here.”

The surprise volley of cannon fire had slowed down our escape, but the chariot was still hurtling toward us. A long-range bombardment followed by a charge, huh? It seemed like this was the mid-boss’s attack pattern. It was simple but formidable—more so the more I thought about it, actually.

There was no way we could challenge the horse general while it was riding a rampaging chariot. Force and Jin would never be able to hit it at those speeds. And if we tried to take it out at range with magic, we’d just get another volley of cannon fire. Even Erin would have a hard time hitting a rapidly moving target while simultaneously trying to avoid incoming fire.

As for me and Roslia... That bombardment just now had separated us from the group. Everyone else had retreated on their own. I could tell where they were thanks to Enemy Search, but the lingering flames from the blast had yet to die down. Getting to them would be difficult.

“This way, Roslia!”

For now, fleeing the chariot took priority. I grabbed Roslia’s hand and led us down an alley that wasn’t ablaze.

Roslia and I had managed to escape the second charge attack, and we were currently hiding inside a house to elude the horsemen nearby. In this area, they summoned the horse general when they

blew their whistles. I had Stealth activated so there was virtually no chance of them finding us, but I could still hear the thundering chariot in the distance. It sounded like it was making another sweeping turn to come back for a third pass. We weren't entirely safe just yet.

"Let's go regroup with the others," Roslia whispered.

It was true that we couldn't hide here forever. With a flaming chariot cruising through town, it would only be a matter of time before the entire thing burned to the ground. Worse yet, the rogue chariot might smash right into the building where we'd taken shelter. But nevertheless...

"No," I said, shaking my head. "We're going to take on the horse general."

"What are you saying?!" Roslia exclaimed loudly, apparently forgetting that we were in hiding. "There's no way just the two of us can do that! We need to go meet up with the others and—"

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid that's impossible at present."

Between Mapping and Enemy Search, I had a pretty good grasp of our situation. I took a moment to catch Roslia up to speed.

"We're currently split into three groups—you and me, Jin and Neme, and Force and Erin—and the others fled in the opposite direction when we got separated earlier. They're a good distance from here now, but with the streets an inferno, there's not a safe way to reach them."

The mid-boss's cannonball barrage had effectively divided and scattered our party. I kept a close eye on everyone's whereabouts via Enemy Search as I continued to explain things to Roslia.

"Jin and I can use Stealth, so we'll have no problem losing the horsemen, but Force and Erin will be in trouble the moment they're discovered. Force might actually be nimble enough to outrun the soldiers on his own, but that's a tall order when he's got Erin to protect."

I'd spent the past several months watching the Arrivers fight and studying what they were capable of. I may have been useless in combat, but my calm analysis was exactly what Roslia needed right now.

"So, in short, our top priority is keeping the horse general away from Force and Erin."

"You don't think we should go find them so we can protect them?"

"Again, I'd love to, but I think we're too far away. We should leave them to Jin and Neme."

Jin would know exactly what to do in a situation like this. And since he could use Enemy Search, tracking down Force and Erin should be a cinch. That would likely be his first priority.

“Fine, I get that much. But I still think it’s asking a lot for me to take on the mid-boss alone...”

“It’s a lot, yeah. But it’s not impossible, right? The paladin of the Arrivers isn’t that squishy.”

“Gosh, you really know how to put a girl to work,” Roslia said with a resigned sigh. “I guess I’ll just have to show my stuff! I’ll stop that horse general right in his tracks, but not for free, Note! Taking advantage of a sweet girl like me is going to cost you!”

“My pockets aren’t very deep, so have a little mercy there.”

“Oh, I’m not asking for money. I want a date when this is all over.”

“Er...”

“Okay, let’s do this!”

Roslia, completely ignoring me, leaped up and dashed right out of the house. I didn’t have any choice but to follow after her.

“Hey, don’t just run out into the open!”

“But this is the fastest way. Our precious friends are in trouble right now, aren’t they? So just sit back and watch! Beacon!”

With that, a brilliant light shot upward from Roslia and pierced the sky. She’d just whipped out an aggro-grab art with no warning...

She was definitely trying to settle this before I could refuse a date with her. I was sure she was going to say something like, “I did exactly what you wanted, so now you owe me!” If she didn’t have ulterior motives, there was no way she’d ever refer to Force and Erin as “precious friends”—that much, I was sure of.

But in stark contrast to my exasperation, Roslia was calmly casting spells on herself. Paladins had a wide variety of support magic, though not as much as priestesses. Their specialty was using buffs on themselves, however, and Roslia took full advantage of that as she readied herself for battle. She was going to take on the horse general at full power.

“Things are going to get dangerous now, Note. You should get back some.”

“Will do.”

There was nothing I could do for Roslia on the front line. If anything, I’d just be in the way—that’s what she was politely telling me. I knew the truth better than anyone though, so I obediently followed her instructions. There was no way the horse general would fail to notice her Beacon. It would be here any second.

And sure enough... it must have made a beeline right for us. It shortly came barreling down the street, crashing through buildings along the way and scattering rubble everywhere. With the fire-breathing horses in front, the whole thing was like a giant cannonball.

“Come and get me! Impenetrable Fortress!”

Roslia summoned her wall of light directionally. It ordinarily encircled her, but it now manifested in front of her—she was putting it up between her and the charging chariot, which was only picking up speed. As it drew nearer, the horses' neighing became indistinguishable from the sound of the blazing flames.

The black chariot charged right through a house to get to Roslia... And the next thing I knew, something hit me. Hard. It was a streetlamp that had been sent flying in the chariot's wake. It took everything I had to brace myself and hold my ground. I didn't want to get sent flying too.

I then looked back over to see Roslia standing strong, even amidst all the flying debris. What a relief. I knew I could count on her.

"I won't lose! Bash!"

She poured her strength into her barrier to meet the charging chariot with equal force. Neither side could withstand the impact. The heads of the two horses pulling the chariot were crushed as they shattered Roslia's barrier into fragments of light. Roslia was blown back while the chariot rolled to a helpless stop.

"Looks like I got you..." Roslia muttered as she emerged from a mountain of rubble.

Her left arm was bent at an unnatural angle. Her head was bleeding.

"There's nothing to fear about a chariot that can't move. Come, Holy Sword Fractus!"

With her skill, Guide of the Holy Sword, Roslia summoned her signature weapon. Her eyes filled with light as she clenched the brilliant blade in her hand—a testament of her will to eliminate the enemy before her. The Regenerate buff spell she'd cast before the battle was gradually correcting her bent arm, and the blood dripping from her forehead had already stopped.

Having determined that the chariot was of no use anymore, the horse general stepped down with a whip in hand. He snapped it against the ground, setting it alight with flames.

"Tch..."

Roslia stepped forward in a bold challenge, signaling the start of their fight. A ruthless exchange of blows followed.

Roslia's holy sword cut right through the horse general's armor, while his whip wailed against Roslia's. She must have taken quite a beating in the initial impact, because she wasn't as quick on her feet as usual. The horse general was also getting in far more attacks. She was clearly at a disadvantage, though that didn't stop her. Believing in herself, she grit her teeth and persistently kept fighting.

"Roslia! The horse!"

One of the black horses that had been pulling the chariot suddenly

belched a fireball. I'd thought the beast was finished after it dashed itself upon Roslia's barrier, but it had been holding out one last attack to try to save its master. With that, it extinguished the last of its life...

But its weak attack was just what the general needed. While Roslia was busy dodging the flames, he caught her with his flaming whip.

"Urgh!"

Her face contorted in pain, but even that didn't stop her. Believing attack was her only means of survival, she went on a brutal offensive. The horse general met her at every turn, and the damage she was taking now outpaced the recovery rate of Regenerate. Drops of blood danced through the air as her flesh was torn apart. Seeing this, I called out to her...

"Okay, Roslia, time's up! Fall back!"

The corners of her lips curled up into a smile... just before a giant spear of ice impaled the horse general's head.

I whipped around to see Erin standing triumphantly on a nearby rooftop, staff in hand. Jin was right beside her.

"A-Are you okay, Roslia?" Neme peeked up and asked nervously.

Faint green light gathered around Roslia in what appeared to be a healing spell.

When I'd said time was up, you see, I'd meant for the horse general. Thanks to Enemy Search, I knew that Jin had rendezvoused with the other group and that they were en route to us. The horsemen were no match for Jin and Force, and Erin could put out the fires in their way with her water magic. It was simply a matter of time before they arrived, and Roslia had done a good job of buying it for us. She was also the perfect distraction for the mid-boss while Erin readied a spell to take him down.

"You're late... I thought I was dead," Roslia griped to Erin, who had descended from the rooftop and was now walking toward her slowly.

"Who cares? Looks like you survived to me," she said.

"Rude."

"Fine. I'll admit you did a good job this time."

To my absolute surprise, Erin actually conceded a compliment. I think this was the first time she'd ever said anything nice to Roslia. Granted, she *did* manage to make it sound a little condescending...

But nevertheless, Roslia seemed satisfied. She smugly high-fived Erin as they crossed paths. I could hardly believe my eyes.



“What are you gawking for?” Erin asked.

“I was just thinking you could stand to be a little more honest,” I replied.

Exploring floor 16 was easier after defeating the mid-boss. There were fewer horsemen, meaning there were fewer to blow the whistle on us *and* fewer to come running when they did. It seemed most of them had perished in the mid-boss’s indiscriminate rampage and the ensuing fire.

But even so, it still took us the better part of the day to reach the boss room. The dungeon floors were getting bigger as we progressed. The most recent ones had taken several days to explore, so making it to the end of this one in a single go was actually quite a feat. All that remained was the boss.

Roslia had now completely recovered from her injuries, however, and the other members were still in top form. This would be different from the mid-boss battle—everyone was raring to go. We pulled the chain attached to the heavy gate as soon as we were all ready. Thanks to Enemy Search, I already knew what was on the other side... but I still wasn’t happy to see it.

“Ugh...”

Before us spread about four hundred horse knights in orderly lines, showcasing their coordination. Like I said, I’d known this was coming, but it was still intimidating to see with my own two eyes. Behind all the knights stood a castle with a single horseman upon its balcony. His gaudy red cape billowed over his shoulder, revealing his gold-trimmed and gemstone-encrusted outfit.

“That’s the horse emperor...” Neme muttered.

Why not the horse king? I wanted to ask, but I refrained.

The horse emperor lifted his right hand to his mouth and blew a whistle. A large monster descended from the sky, summoned by the sound. Seeing it gave me goosebumps.

“A dragon? You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

Crimson scales, sharp fangs, thick wings. This was a bona fide dragon. A big one, too. It was several dozen times bigger than any of us—easily as large as one of the castle wings. It landed right beneath the balcony, shattering the cobblestone in the courtyard below and smashing in part of the castle with its heavy tail.

This floor’s theme was all over the damn place! The horsemen were one thing, but this was another altogether!

The horse emperor nodded in satisfaction and approached the balcony railing. He then climbed onto the dragon and descended its neck, taking his seat in the saddle on its back. Once in place, he raised the slung lance at its side, waving it so that the pennant flag was

visible for all to see.

So that's how you use a dragon...

Of course, my awe at the sight was abruptly interrupted when the dragon opened its mouth wide at the emperor's command. Roslia quickly raised her barrier to protect us...

"Impenetrable Fortress!"

But all the horsemen in front of the dragon were blown away by its roar. It was such a raw, menacing display of power that I reflexively stepped back a bit.

The horse knights were now scattered in disarray. So much for their formation, I guess. Who lines soldiers up in front of a dragon, anyway? I was honestly amused at the chaotic scene, but the threat of the dragon still had me on my toes as everyone prepared for battle.

Notably, I could feel a torrent of magical energy welling up beside me. Erin was already at work, it seemed.

"Absolute Zero!"

An expanding circle of blue light projected out from the end of her staff. Everything it touched immediately froze in place. It caught scores of horse knights, and even the left wing of the dragon as it took off in an attempt to escape. When it tried to forcibly flap the frozen wing midair, it snapped right off at the base, sending the dragon and the horse emperor tumbling to the ground together.

Erin had started pooling energy for this spell before we even opened the door. Since the boss fight wouldn't start until we entered the chamber, it was usually a good idea to prepare beforehand. We hadn't gone in until Erin was ready, which was how she was able to cast such a devastating blow so soon into the battle. Absolute Zero was one of the most powerful spells a mage could learn.

And after that, all that was left was the cleanup. This was a cakewalk compared to the mid-boss.

"Regenerate Plus! Rise Up! Full Attack! Guardian's Protection! Fortress! Saint's Protection! All right!"

Neme cast buff after buff on the party. With each spell she incanted, my body gradually grew hotter. Her incredible magic made even a nobody like *me* feel invincible. In the moment, I was ready to take on the boss myself.

"Jin, I'll leave the rear line to you," Force said, stepping forward.

In his hand, he carried the katana he usually kept in its scabbard. This was the first time I'd ever seen him wield it. In our dungeon adventures so far, he'd always used Gleaming Beast, the silver sword in the white sheath. If he was finally bringing out the other one, I could only assume it meant he was going all out for a new boss fight.

"Neme, if things get ugly, forcibly cast Dispel on me," he said.

That comment confused me. What was he talking about?

“Is this your first time seeing Force use Purgatory, Note?” Erin asked as she channeled more energy into her staff.

“Purgatory?” I parroted.

“His second sword.”

Purgatory...

I repeated the word again in my head as I stared at the sword. It was a fitting name. The scarlet blade was fashioned with a black guard and handle. I didn’t know the first thing about swords, but its beauty captivated me. Gleaming Beast was beautiful too, but Purgatory’s beauty was different. The former had a serene elegance, while the latter was the polar opposite. It was almost like it had been forged from chaos itself... The strange charm of the blade was indescribable.

When Force drew Purgatory from its sheath, he was immediately engulfed in black flames. I gasped at the sight. He looked like he’d been swallowed—head, arms, and all—by a wicked fire. Erin, however, seemed unfazed.

“Purgatory is a cursed sword that burns its user,” she explained calmly.

“Isn’t that a bad thing? I mean, is Force okay?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. He’s always survived using it before,” she replied nonchalantly. “Have you forgotten about his skills? He has Major Magic Resistance, remember? That’s what allows him to withstand Purgatory’s cursed flames. Neme’s support helps too, though.”

“Wait, you can use Magic Resistance that way?”

“Yup. I was surprised the first time I saw it myself, but the show’s just getting started. Force’s combat ability when he wields that thing is seriously inhuman...” Erin said, biting her lip. “Superior Sword Mastery combined with a cursed sword that steals its user’s life in exchange for the power of a hundred men... It irks me to acknowledge such an irresponsible fool, but even I’m convinced Force is probably the strongest swordsman in the world.”

“The strongest swordsman...?”

I was enamored with that phrase. But as my heart skipped a beat, Force leveled his sword at the dragon and let out a roar of his own.

“Bring it on, big guy! It’s not personal, but I’m taking you *down*! The Arrivers are coming through!” he declared as black flames danced across his skin, threatening to consume him. “You may not understand me, but mark my words! I’m Force Granz, leader of the Arrivers, and I’ll soon be the first man in the world to clear a dungeon!”



Peaceful and Unpeaceful Days

Two days after we cleared floor 16, Roslia approached me...

"Note, let's go on a date!"

"Huh? Why?"

Flustered by the sudden invitation, I watched as she pouted at me.

"Don't tell me you forgot your promise!"

"Oh, that..."

Right, there was something like that... Rather than saying I forgot, it was more like I'd never agreed to it to begin with... I tried to turn her down on the spot, but the look in her eyes as she stared at me was so scary that I just stayed silent. I'm not a coward. I'm just a nice guy.

"Of course I remember. When do you want to go?"

"Today!"

That was way too sudden. What about my plans? At least give me some warning...

"Sorry, I can't do today... Erin asked me to help with the grocery shopping. Can we take a rain check?"

"What? No. Someone else can help with the shopping. Neme's probably free, so ask her to do it instead."

Hey, don't just volunteer Neme like that. She might have plans too, you know? She could be going out with her friends, or... Wait, yeah, okay. She's probably free.

"But canceling on Erin at the last minute is going to make her angry..."

If I told Erin I couldn't go shopping with her because I was going on a date with Roslia instead, she'd definitely snap at me. I could hear it now: *"You let that witch manipulate you?!"*

Roslia cocked her head slightly at my persuasion attempt.

"I think she'd be more angry to hear you and Neme were in the bath together."

That's blackmail! Wait, how does she know about that? She noticed us?!

If Roslia had known what was going on, she could've at least come to save me... Well, whatever. It was all resolved peacefully in the end. I certainly wasn't about to let someone blackmail me over it

"What a coincidence, Roslia! I was just thinking about how much I really wanted to go on a date with you, so let's go right now!"

“Huh? What happened to shopping with Erin?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Who cares about Erin? Anyway, date time! Where shall we go today? So many options...”

“I know I was the one who brought it up, but... Didn’t you change your mind a bit too quickly? I like you, Note, but that part of you kind of puts me off.”

I couldn’t hear Roslia’s complaints at all. Nope, no ears here. Now, let’s get to that date!

“Ah, I’ve done it now... Erin’s really gonna be steamed when we get back...” I sighed.

“Could you not act so pitiful after dashing out of the house so confidently? It’s pretty pathetic...” Roslia sighed in turn.

I had to agree it was pathetic to whine after the fact, but I’d ditched Erin without even telling her. It was the only way to evade her. She was probably back at HQ right now, losing her temper because I wasn’t there when I was supposed to be...

Ugh, just imagining it made my blood run cold. My whole body was trembling. Thinking about what was going to happen to me when I got home was even worse, so I just decided to forget about it. I’d never made a promise with Erin and there was nothing wrong. The end.

“Roslia, let’s go all out today. Let’s have so much fun that we forget all our cares.”

“I’m glad you’re so on board for once, but you look awful... Are you okay?”

Yep, totally fine! I’m not worried about a thing!

“So, Roslia, where do you want to go? Puriff Beach? Blessing Spring?”

“We’ve already been to both of those places...”

Gah, you’re not supposed to point that out! Look, I don’t know any other date spots, okay?!

Turned out all the cards in my hand were no good. My lack of experience was really biting me.

“In that case, maybe the clocktower...?” I suggested.

The most famous sightseeing spot in all of Puriff was my last resort. If she turned that down too, then I really had nothing.

“I’m bored of the clocktower... I must’ve been there fifty times already.”

This was where I just needed to let sleeping dogs lie. If I asked why Roslia had been to the clocktower fifty times already, we’d be diving right back into her absurd past... Wait, wasn’t fifty kind of unreasonable? Just how many men did she have dancing in her palm?

“Okay, well, it sounds like we should avoid any of the big-name

places...”

“Yeah. I’m sure I’ll have fun anywhere as long as I’m with you, Note, so I want to make memories together somewhere I’ve never gone before.”

Somewhere Roslia hasn’t been before, huh?

“Like a dive bar?”

“Well, it’s true I’ve never been to one, but is that really where you want to go on a date?”

“Sorry. I know I suggested it, but I take it back.”

I was starting to get the feeling there was no point in putting on airs in front of Roslia. I should just surrender honestly and let her plan our date.

“Sorry, I can’t think of anything else. If you’d be so kind as to decide our destination for us, Lady Roslia...”

“Aren’t you giving up a bit too quickly? Try to come up with *something!*”

“I’m at a loss. I never hang out with girls.”

“Really? I figured you went out with Erin and Neme all the time.”

“Hardly. We’ve only ever been out for gear or grocery shopping. Business like that. Really, I think the only person I’ve genuinely hung out with since coming to town is you, Roslia...”

Granted, whether or not my ploy to get her to break up with Force counted as “genuinely hanging out” was debatable, but still... Yeah, it totally counted, right? It wasn’t business, so it had to be pleasure. See? Even Roslia seemed to agree.

“Really?!” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, that’s wonderful, Note! Say it again! Tell me I’m the only girl you’ll ever hang out with now and forevermore!”

I really wished she hadn’t latched on to the fact that I didn’t have anyone else to hang out with. It was embarrassing. Also, I never said that last bit—that was complete exaggeration on her part.

“Victory is within my grasp without any rivals to stand in my way... Heh heh heh...”

I also wished she wouldn’t mutter in a low voice with such a creepy grin. It was scary. Moreover, what was all this about “victory” and “rivals”? She’d completely lost me.

“You leave me no choice! I, your darling Roslia, will happily come to the rescue of such an innocent boy! I’ll take you on a date that you’ll remember forever!”

“You know, being called an ‘innocent boy’ by a girl at my age kinda hurts...”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

“Don’t apologize... It just hurts more.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Please...”

Did all dates start as such a mess?

“So, what do you think? It’s... the clocktower, ta-dah!” Roslia declared, spreading her arms wide.

Indeed, we were standing before the tallest brick building in town, the clocktower of Puriff. Roslia was nodding smugly to herself, and I nervously raised my hand with a question.

“Um... Didn’t we decide *not* to come here?”

“Yes, we did. And I boldly vowed that I would take you on the date of a lifetime. I wanted to go somewhere incredible... but yeah, this was the best I could come up with too. Sorry.”

After our earlier conversation, Roslia had spent nearly an hour pondering over her date plan. It was only when I politely pointed out that the sun was going to set before we ever made it anywhere that we ended up coming to the clocktower anyway. It was a local icon though, so I *had* always wanted to come here...

“I’m not mad, so don’t let it bother you. I was the one who couldn’t come up with anywhere better to go in the first place...”

“You’re a nice guy, Note. It’s true that dates aren’t about where you go, but rather who you’re with.”

“That’s right, it’s about who you’re with... Ha, and here I am with *you*...”

“Rude! What is that supposed to mean?!”

It’s just, y’know, considering your record...

I’d recently started to think that Roslia wasn’t such a bad person after all, but I couldn’t let my guard down around her. There was still a possibility that she was plotting her revenge against me. If that were true at this point, though, I might lose my trust in women completely.

“Sorry, sorry. I was just trying to hide my embarrassment,” I said.

That was a lie, but Roslia seemed to accept it. She crossed her arms and gave a satisfied nod.

“I forgive you. Now let’s go climb the clocktower already.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of excited now that we’re here. Let’s go.”

We wrapped up our trifling conversation and made our way inside. After paying the entry fee at the welcome counter, we boarded the lift in the center of the tower. The rectangular metal box rattled for a minute or so before we arrived at our destination—the viewing platform. The sweeping vista of Puriff far exceeded my expectations.

“Incredible...”

“Isn’t it? Aren’t you happy we came?”

“Yeah... I-It’s so beautiful, I’m wondering why I didn’t come sooner...”

“I’m glad.”

Since it was the middle of a weekday, the platform wasn't particularly crowded. Between the view and the fact that I was here on a date... I was so moved that I was almost speechless. I guess you could say it took my breath away.

"Look, Note! You can see HQ from here!"

"Wow, I had no idea this is what it looks like from a bird's-eye view..."

"It's pretty bold. It really stands out."

"Yeah, seeing it like this, it's almost a little embarrassing."

"Oh, but look! You can see Blessing Spring from here too!"

"Really? Where?"

"Look! Right over there!"

"Oh, I see it!"

"That's where we went on our first date!"

"I remember. That means we met up right over there... And look, that's the road we took to get to the spring."

"Yeah, you're right. And right over there must be where we got kidnapped by those bandits."

"Why reminisce about *that*?"

"What? It's just another one of my precious memories with you!"

Damn, this is so much fun! It feels so good to be out on a proper date! I'm so glad I came! Dates are the best! The clocktower rules!

I didn't think simply looking out over the town and having a casual conversation could bring me so much happiness. I was even fondly looking back on meeting Roslia in the moment. What's that? I'm too easy, you say? Trust me, I know. But I just couldn't help myself! I was having fun!

"Man... I could admire this view forever."

"Let's stay right here for a little while, then."

With that, Roslia leaned her head on my shoulder. Her hair smelled nice.

After whiling away the time taking in the scenery from the clocktower, we decided to get lunch. We then wandered the shops of the market street until the sun began to set. It really felt like the day had flown by... It was a shame.

"We're almost home..."

Our footsteps were heavy as we made our way back to HQ. These familiar streets were lined with stores we saw all the time, yet the sight of them now filled me with dread.

"Hey, do you want to do a little more window shopping?" Roslia asked.

"Sure. Want to check out one of these shops?" I agreed, eagerly taking Roslia by the hand.

I led her to a shop I knew in the neighborhood even though I didn't have any particular business there. Honestly, it wouldn't have mattered where we went. I just didn't want to go home yet, and I could tell Roslia felt the same way.

"This is fun, isn't it? Just casually going around shopping together like we're newlyweds."

"Want me to ask you what we're having for dinner and then go to the grocer's or something?"

"Yeah, just like that! You get me, Note."

Roslia then squeezed my arm in a hug. I pulled my arm in, bringing her closer.

"I don't want to go back," she whispered.

"Yeah, but we really should. The sun's already set."

"That's too bad... Why don't we just go on another date, then?"

She looked up at me with tears in her desperate eyes. There was no way I could refuse her like this.

"Sure, let's go on another—"

"What are *you* doing here, Note?"

Huh, that was strange... I felt like I heard a voice behind me. A voice I shouldn't have been hearing. Surely it wasn't who I thought it was. No, it couldn't be. I had to be hallucinating or something...

"If I find out you ditched me to go on a date, I'll never let you live it down."

Nope, definitely wasn't hallucinating. I could feel magical energy welling up behind me. With a stiff, creaking movement, I turned my head to look... and sure enough, there stood a silver-haired mage glaring daggers at me.

Welp, that terrifying sight snapped me back to my senses. What *was* I doing letting Roslia charm me like that? Had I lost my mind? I hardly realized what I'd gotten myself into until I heard Erin's voice. I'd had my head so far in the clouds that I wasn't even using Enemy Search. Go figure I'd run into her. This was the neighborhood grocery store, after all! Yup! That's right! The one we normally shop at! I really was an idiot...

Why the hell had I brushed off Erin just to turn around and go exactly where we were supposed to meet?! I should have known better!

I suppose this was only inevitable. I had intentionally purged all thoughts of my obligations from my mind earlier this afternoon. I'd forgotten all about Erin and grocery shopping—and now I was paying the price.

"Save me, Roslia..." I quietly begged.

"Sorry. Whatever I say is just going to add fuel to the fire."

"I guess so, huh? Haha..."

“Oh, don’t worry, Note,” Erin assured me. “I’ll listen to every excuse you’ve got, *so start talking!*”

I accordingly spent the rest of the night apologizing.



Despair for Two, Alone

The Arrivers had set a new party record upon clearing floor 16 the other day, and we were back in the dungeon today to get our feet wet on floor 17—an uncharted floor that appeared to be a series of floating islands of various sizes in the sky. There were bridges and floating stepping stones too, which allowed for travel between the islands. It seemed obvious enough that reaching floor 18 would be a simple matter of progressing across them.

Today, however, we were only here to explore and get a feel for the area. Diving straight into floor 16 had been a disaster, so we'd decided to scout out the next floor before making a serious attempt at clearing it. That was the plan, anyway. Things don't always go as planned in the dungeon, you see.

We were in the middle of exploring the floor and testing out combat with the various mobs when the mid-boss swooped out of the sky and attacked us. We'd apparently entered its zone without even realizing it.

So, at present, the muscular, winged mid-boss was blocking our way forward. It was several times larger than any of us, and it had six arms and two legs. It wore a sturdy bone helmet decorated with horns. Protruding veins ran across its muscles under its gray skin. The only fair thing to call it was a monster—and the Arrivers were currently struggling against it.

“Stream!”

Jin evaded the flurry of lightning-fast punches the mid-boss unleashed on him at the last moment, returning the favor with one, then two slashing attacks. He then quickly jumped back defensively with Withdraw.

And it was all everyone else could do just to watch him fight. We couldn't help him even if we'd wanted to... for right now, we were stuck. Unluckily, the mid-boss had descended upon us while we were on a series of floating stepping stones between islands, leaving us at a huge disadvantage in terms of terrain.

Not only was our footing terrible, but the islands were a good distance apart. Trying to retreat backward or rush forward when the winged mid-boss was so mobile would be extremely difficult. Worse yet, the stepping stones between the islands were boobytrapped. This floor had had an unsettling number of traps so far, and we'd been in

the process of trying to dismantle the ones currently around us when the mid-boss appeared.

So, the only person in the party who had the mobility to take on the mid-boss *and* safely avoid the traps was Jin. If it weren't for the traps, Force and Roslia could have helped him—but one wrong step as things stood would spell disaster. Erin, our long-ranged attacker, couldn't do anything either. The mid-boss was built like a melee fighter, but apparently had plenty of ranged attacks in its arsenal. It liked to shoot feathers and throw the stepping stones around. We couldn't risk the boss targeting her, so we kept her back for her own safety.

That left Jin to take the front line solo, which might sound pretty dire... but things actually seemed to be going okay. Jin was holding his own against the mid-boss. He artfully used Trap Dismantling while steadily whittling away at the monster. The traps at his feet kept him busy enough that he wasn't getting in very many attacks, but if he kept this up, he would gradually wear the mid-boss down to nothing.

The tables could turn in an instant, however, if it managed to land a single hit on Jin. I didn't even want to imagine what would happen to him if he took a blow from this guy. Really, this was a battle of attrition. Which would last longer, the mid-boss's health or Jin's stamina?

I was trying to help Jin out by dismantling as many traps as I could around the area. I just had to make sure that I stayed out of his way and avoided attracting the mid-boss's attention. Over the course of exploring the dungeon with the Arrivers, I'd slowly figured out how monster aggro worked. Between that knowledge and Enemy Search, I generally had a good sense of who mobs would target. So I'd made sure I wasn't a priority target, erased my presence with Stealth, and then quietly begun work on dismantling traps.

Thus, slowly but surely, we were making progress. A little bit longer like this and we'd be out of here without a problem. Except, just as I thought that...

The mid-boss let out a shrill cry that felt like it would pierce my head. I covered my ears in a panic. The howl made Jin hesitate for an instant. And in that split-second opening, the monster's target shifted from Jin to Erin, who was standing by on the rear line.

Perhaps it was because Roslia didn't have her aggro beacon active like usual. Or perhaps Erin was just standing in the wrong place. Either way, it was bad luck. And whatever the reason, the mid-boss sent one of the stepping stones hurtling at her.

As a top-tier adventurer herself, she naturally reacted immediately...

“Block!”

She put up a barrier spell in front of her to protect herself.

No, that's not enough...

With that thought, my mind stopped working. I instinctively took off, dashing toward Erin.

That stone...

“Dodge it, Erin! It’s trapped!”

The stone the mid-boss had thrown was one I hadn’t gotten to yet—it was still armed with a trap. I flew toward Erin in vain, for the stone crashed into her barrier before I could reach her.

“...!”

The ensuing flash of light swallowed us both.

I slowly opened my eyes...

Huh?

And I started to panic. I closed my eyes and opened them again repeatedly—but nothing changed. I wasn’t dreaming.

The mid-boss was nowhere in sight... And neither were Jin, Force, Neme, and Roslia. The only person I could see was Erin, who looked equally bewildered by the situation we found ourselves in. She was blinking at an abnormally high rate.

Seriously... where are we?

I had no idea. The scenery before us was completely different from the floating islands we’d been crossing—it now looked like we were inside a building. Some kind of ruin, perhaps? The walls were only dimly lit by the candles on the wall.

“What just happened...?”

I didn’t know where we were or how we’d gotten here. I had so many questions and couldn’t fill in any of the blanks, so I started to wonder if I’d blacked out. Erin, however, seemed to have an answer.

“I think that was... a teleportation trap...” she said quietly.

“A teleportation trap?” I asked.

“Yeah. It forcibly teleports whoever gets caught in it...”

Where we found ourselves now was nothing like the area where we’d been fighting the mid-boss. We were in a narrow stone room with corridors at either end and candles placed at fixed intervals along the wall, which was covered sparsely with ivy and scrawled with some kind of writing. Yeah, Erin was right. It definitely looked like we’d been teleported somewhere...

“This is bad, isn’t it?” I mumbled.

“I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. If I had noticed the trap...” Erin mumbled even quieter.

“That’s not what I’m saying. It wasn’t your fault... Just bad luck.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I’m still to blame,” she murmured, hanging her head low.

I didn't see the point in quibbling over who bore the responsibility for this, so I decided to try changing the topic altogether.

"At any rate, we should hurry and meet back up with the others," I said. "I'm a little worried that I can't sense them nearby."

None of our party members were registering via Enemy Search. All I could detect nearby were considerably strong monsters.

"Yeah, you're right," Erin agreed. "What about Mapping? Do you have any idea where we are?"

"Not a clue. I don't see the islands where we were before, so we've been sent a good ways away."

My Mapping skill revealed the kilometer around me in the form of a map in my head. And all that was on my mental map, at present, was a maze. The entire kilometer around us was a complicated labyrinth of passageways.

"That trap could have sent us anywhere. There's no way to know where they go until you activate them. We might even be outside the dungeon," Erin explained.

In that case, we'd been lucky. If there was no telling where the trap would send us, we could have ended up underwater or in lava. Or thousands of meters in the air. So, for now, I was just grateful that we were still alive.

"I think we're still in the dungeon based on this maze and the monsters nearby, though," I mused.

The various floors of the dungeon were like worlds unto themselves; there was nothing above or below them, so my mental maps cut off at the top and the bottom. That's what I was seeing now, though it was difficult to explain to someone who couldn't see my map. Judging from the strength of the monsters I could sense around us, however, there was no way we were anywhere on the surface.

"Okay, then let's see if we can track the others down," Erin said with a bit more pep in her voice. "Guide us forward while avoiding monsters if you can."

She seemed to be heartened by the prospect of reuniting with the rest of the party, and began walking toward the corridor at one end of the room. The candles on the wall illuminated the way well enough, and I could tell via Enemy Search that there weren't any monsters ahead. I figured it would be fine just to follow her for now, but as I started walking myself, something struck me...

"Hold on, Erin."

"What's wrong?" she asked, a bit perturbed as she turned around.

"Can you read this? It looks like dungeon script, so I was wondering if there might be some kind of clue for us..."

I indicated the writing on the wall that I'd spotted earlier. It was behind us, so Erin hadn't noticed it yet. She turned to look where I

was pointing and...

“...!”

The moment she saw the script, her eyes went wide. Her pupils expanded by the second as her mouth gaped. She was soon as pale as a ghost.

“Erin?”

I tried calling out to her, but she didn’t respond. She was still staring at the wall. Something was wrong—that was my first thought.

“Hey, Erin! Are you okay?!” I asked, grabbing her shoulders.

“A-Ah...”

Shaking her seemed to snap her back to her senses, but she still couldn’t manage a proper response. Her teeth chattered as her breathing hastened. She sounded like she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

“What’s gotten into you? What does the writing say?”

“Th-There’s no way... Th-That just can’t be...”

“What is it? What does it say?”

“No... I don’t believe it...”

“Believe what? Erin—”

“Shut up!” she suddenly yelled, the blood all but drained from her face. “Fine! If you want to know that much, I’ll tell you what it says...”

She trailed off there for a moment, and then read with great trepidation, “It says, ‘Welcome. This is floor 20.’”

“F-Floor 20?”

I think that was the closest I’ve ever come to whiting out. The moment I heard those shocking words was just so overwhelming, so terrifyingly vivid. I could hardly make sense of what Erin had said.

Floor 20? What the hell?

Just moments ago, we were casually exploring floor 17. We were supposed to be back at HQ this afternoon. How... How had things come to this?

I didn’t want to accept it, but my gut was telling me there was no salvation here—no, it was Enemy Search telling me so. Thanks to that, I could see how strong the enemies prowling the area were, even though I really didn’t want to know. They were exactly what you would expect of monsters on floor 20: devastatingly strong.

“That’s right... It’s honestly laughable,” Erin scoffed with a dry laugh that reverberated in the stone chamber. “This is the end for us...”

The light left her eyes as her strength left her body. She slumped to the floor and hung her head as she began muttering to herself.

“Stranded on floor 20 with Note, who can’t even fight? This is impossible. We’ll never make it out alive. Is that sign just to taunt us? It might as well tell us to die...”

I wanted to argue with her, but silently choked back my protest. As frustrating as it was, she wasn't wrong. I couldn't refute anything she said.

Our odds of survival were bleak. There was no way Erin and I could escape floor 20 alone. I didn't have any combat skills, and Erin was just one mage. She couldn't defeat all the monsters on this floor by herself. Her specialty was long-range attacks, and she had the opportunity to shine in the Arrivers because the other party members supported her. Without a front line fighter to distract the monsters, they would come for her and wipe her out in an instant.

Are we really going to die here?

I looked around again in desperation. A dim stone chamber. Candles that showed no signs of melting. Grey ivy creeping up the walls. Dank air that clung to my skin.

It can't be, right? I can't die in a place like this...

Everything had been going so perfectly. We were steadily making progress in the dungeon, and I was learning more about arts little by little. I was having fun spending my days teasing Neme, falling for Roslia, and bantering with Force...

How is that all gone in the blink of an eye? Why does it all have to end here?

I already knew the answer. I'd known it long ago. This was... all on me. I'd just forgotten for a time. Forgotten that the dungeon we were challenging was a graveyard for countless adventurers before us.

Joining a top-tier party like the Arrivers had shielded me from that harsh reality, but the truth was that every second we spent in the dungeon was like walking a tightrope strung high over the abyss of death. I'd been trying to get stronger in the name of ignoring that.

I understood what "mortal danger" meant, but I'd never experienced it. And now, here on floor 20? It hit me like a landslide. Too bad the realization came all too late. I should've been more careful.

What an utter fool I was. How pathetic can a guy be? Erin was right. This really was laughable. I couldn't help the corners of my mouth curling upward into a twisted grin.

"I don't want to die yet," Erin whispered, trembling as she hugged herself.

She was the exact opposite of her usual confident self right now... And seeing her lose it actually helped me pull together some.

That's right. Calm down, Note. Now's not the time for this.

Enemy Search was ringing alarm bells in my head. A monster was approaching. If it found us in such a defenseless state, we'd be done for. I slapped my cheeks to collect myself. We'd have plenty of time to rue our fate later. For now, we had to run. To live as long as possible.

“Get up, Erin. A monster’s coming. We need to flee,” I said. I took her by the arm, but she still had no strength. She was completely unresponsive, like dead weight. “Come on, Erin!”

“Huh...? What...?”

“Snap out of it! We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“R-Right... That’s right. We have to run...”

She seemed to return to her senses when I shouted, but her voice was still weak and so were her knees. She unsteadily rose to her feet and immediately staggered into me. I reached out to support her.

“Erin, are you okay?”

“I’m fine... fine...”

Her trailing response told me she wasn’t *really* okay. She was probably even more shocked than I was. Understandable, I guess. She was the unlucky soul who’d been stranded on floor 20 with the most worthless member of our party, after all.

If she were here with Force or Jin, she might have some hope. Erin wasn’t a good match for me either, however. I was grateful I wasn’t down here with Neme, but Erin was only marginally better. In that sense, I understood her despair, but that didn’t mean we could afford to sit around and wallow in it. If Erin had no hope, I would just have to give it to her.

“The warp crystal might be right around the corner. We could be out of here in no time. Jin and the others may have been teleported somewhere nearby too, so let’s just get a move on for now.”

I knew all of those prospects were dismal. I didn’t have any faith in them myself—it was all just well-meaning deceit on my part. The odds we’d ended up near the warp crystal on such a large floor were virtually nil. I was also certain that the other Arrivers had been outside of the trap’s range when it went off. There was no way they were on this floor with us.

Even if there was another trap on floor 17 that sent its victims to floor 20, Jin and the others would have no way of identifying it. Furthermore, there was no way for them to reach this floor *without* a teleportation trap. Now that they were down their mage and navigator, they had no hope of clearing the uncharted floors between us. If they tried, it would spell the end of the entire party—not just me and Erin.

Above all, this was floor 20. No active adventuring party had ever reached this far before. We had absolutely no hope of rescue. No one was coming to save us. If we wanted to survive, we were going to have to do it ourselves.

“Y-You’re right, Note! There’s hope yet! If we can find the warp crystal or meet up with the others, we can still make it out of here!” Erin declared, her eyes now alight with optimism.

It was easy enough to motivate her, it seemed, but it was crystal clear that she'd be a useless mess when despair struck again. I'd just have to keep pumping her with false hope.

She won't be much help like this. Looks like I'm on my own...

With no one to count on but myself, I suppressed the anxiety welling within me, grabbed Erin's hand, and took off.

I carefully watched the map in my head as we ran. There were monsters lurking around nearly every corner, each one powerful enough to overwhelm the two of us together. The enemies on floor 17 were nothing compared to floor 20. If Erin and I ran into a single one, that would be all she wrote. I had to choose a path that kept us out of their way entirely.

What if we took a right up ahead, then a left at the third intersection? Would that work?

If that monster turns around, we're screwed...

Maybe we should duck left. There are more monsters than if we go right, but they're not moving much. They should be easier to avoid.

Going straight was a bad idea... Should we turn back?

Damn it! I should have taken that last left!

I had to avoid running into monsters at all costs, which severely limited our options. Trying to puzzle out the safest route was beyond my brainpower in the heat of the moment. Escape seemed impossible. There were too many monsters. One wrong turn and we were dead.

Worse yet, trying to think and run at the same time was killing me. I didn't have enough oxygen in my lungs to fuel both my muscles and my mind. I kept doubting myself. I was breaking.

Is this really the right way? Do I know where I'm going?

What if we're actually running in the wrong direction? Away from the warp crystal? How would I even know?

One worry spiraled into another. My confidence was completely gone now, but we had to keep going. Stopping would mean certain death too.

"Wait... Note, hold up..."

Suddenly, there was a tug on my right arm. The contrary force brought me to an immediate halt. I turned to see Erin panting heavily and sweating profusely.

"I can't... You have to slow down..." she begged.

Unlike her whining earlier, it seemed like she was really at her limit now. Erin couldn't keep up with me in terms of stamina. I should have realized something so obvious sooner, but I was only focused on myself in my panic. I hadn't been thinking about Erin at all, and now I was facing the consequences—she was completely spent.

Who was I to call Erin useless? I'm the useless one here...

I'd lost my cool. The threat of imminent death had prevented me from making sound judgments.

"Yeah, sorry. I'll slow down."

As far as I could see with Enemy Search, there was a fair distance between us and the closest monsters. There was no real need for us to be running right now, so we might as well save our energy for when we really needed it. There was no telling how big floor 20 was. We could be at this for days.

"Let's stop running and just walk for now."

I took Erin by the hand before she could catch her breath and pressed onward.

Shit! I picked the wrong way! What the hell was I thinking?! This is awful!

Violent frustration roiled within me. I blew off steam by tapping my right foot repeatedly. I had to calm down. I needed to think clearly now more than ever before. I took a deep breath and organized my thoughts.

It had been ten hours since we were teleported to floor 20. I was getting used to the movement patterns of the monsters here, so navigating was slightly easier than it had been at first. The exhaustion, however, was getting to me. I'd lost focus and let my guard down. I didn't notice until it was too late...

A monster was just down the corridor from us. We'd run straight into it if we kept going. But we couldn't retrace our steps—a pack of monsters had just entered the same corridor behind us. They were still too far away for me to see them, but we were now effectively sandwiched between mobs. Worse yet, the monster up ahead was headed our way. Confrontation was inevitable.

What do we do? I have to think of a way out of this...

"What's wrong?" Erin asked, suspicious of how I'd come to a screeching halt.

Answering her would take up precious time I didn't have—time I needed to think.

Should we just wait here and hope the monster turns back?

No, that would have been too convenient. I had to plan for the worst and assume that the monster would come for us.

Then should we fight it?

I turned to look at Erin, carefully observing her face. Running for half a day had completely exhausted her. A fight was out of the question. It would have been tough enough under ideal circumstances. Betting everything on Erin in her current condition was just too much of a gamble.

That leaves us with only one other option...

I prepared myself and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Erin, but I screwed up. The monsters have us flanked now."

"What...?" she gasped, immediately going pale upon hearing my confession.

Before she could lose her composure, however, I continued: "I need you to stay calm and listen to me. I'm going to use Stealth on us and just let the monsters pass by."

"How...?"

"Stealth will erase our presence. The monsters will never notice us."

"I-Is that even possible...?"

"I think so, yeah. We should be fine as long as we move to the side of the path and conceal ourselves."

"You want us to just *hide* from the monsters? If they find us, it's all over!"

"Yeah. But if they don't, we get to live."

"Still—"

"Right now, I think it's our best shot at survival."

"We can't just fight them? Are they too strong to take out with a single spell?"

"I'm afraid so," I said with a solemn nod. "There's one monster approaching from the front, but there's an entire group behind us. Even if we can engage and take out the lone monster, the group behind us would notice. That's the worst case scenario I want to avoid, which is why I think using Stealth is our safest bet."

Erin stared at me with quivering eyes.

"Can I trust you, Note? If you're wrong, we're going to die together."

This was the key moment in persuading her. I made sure not to break eye contact as I answered.

"You can trust me. Things will be fine—no, I'll make sure they're fine. Don't worry."

I wasn't just putting on a brave face, and I wasn't bluffing. It had been nearly four months since I first learned Stealth, and I'd been training all this time in earnest. That was what gave me confidence. I should be better than the average thief by now. I had to be. Jin—a top-tier assassin—had personally taught me everything I knew.

Even if I was just the party navigator, I was still a thief of the Arrivers. There's no way I *couldn't* do this. What was the point of all my training otherwise? I couldn't stay the weakest party member forever. No, now it was my turn to protect someone.

Confidence meant effort, and effort meant confidence. If you were confident without putting in the work to earn it, you were just

arrogant. And if you weren't confident at all, you just needed to try harder. True confidence came when you put in blood, sweat, and tears—and you were *proud* of it.

As for me, I had faith in my training and the results it would yield. I was confident, and Erin folded under my unwavering gaze.

"I'm counting on you then... But I won't forgive you if you screw this up. You'll pay for it in hell."

One way or another, it sounded like she trusted me.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

The sound of damp footsteps slowly and steadily drew nearer.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

In the moment, I had to fight the doubts creeping into the back of my mind. This wasn't the time to second guess myself. I warily turned to see what was coming.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

The monster had yet to appear from the shadows. As I waited for it to approach, I told myself over and over again that things would be fine.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

In the meantime, I turned my attention to Erin, who was shaking in my arms. I pulled her closer in an attempt to reassure her. That's right. Everything would be fine.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

To keep out of sight, we were currently cowering in the ivy growing along the wall. It gave us visual camouflage and made it easier for me to use Stealth. I just had to concentrate on fading away into the background...

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

The damp footsteps grew closer and closer.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

It finally emerged from the darkness. It looked green, maybe blue. My blurry eyes couldn't distinguish the color.

I couldn't even tell what the monster was. Some kind of frog? The candlelight glinted off of its skin like it was covered in some kind of mucus-like film. It walked along on two legs at a slow, leisurely pace... but I couldn't let my guard down just yet.

As it got closer, I could see how thick its legs were. Muscles bulged along each one. If it leaped, I was sure it could clear dozens of meters with ease. The monster itself was maybe a head taller than me, but its eyes were oddly large compared to the rest of its body. And contrary to its bulky legs, its arms were somewhat gangly. They were just as scrawny as mine.

As another upright monster, this frog-like creature called to mind

the horsemen of floor 16. But the horsemen were astoundingly humanoid, whereas this monster was merely a bipedal beast. It didn't seem sentient or intelligent. It was like it was merely moving on instinct.

Fw-fwump, fw-fwump...

It was nearly right next to us now. I could have reached out and touched it if I'd wanted. It walked so agonizingly slow that I wished it would hurry. My heart was beating so hard that I thought it might give out. It was pounding so loud that I thought the frog-monster might even hear it. Stealth wouldn't do us any good at this rate.

Please... I'm begging you...

But no matter how hard I wished, my heart just wouldn't stop thumping. Wait, no... That wasn't my heart—it was Erin's! I slowly turned to look at her. Her unblinking eyes were wide open as she trembled beside me.



I held her close, but even secure in my arms, she wouldn't stop shaking. Her mouth hung agape in fear. I was worried she might scream at any moment.

Hey! Keep it together, damn it!

I wanted to yell at her, but that certainly wasn't an option under the circumstances. With no other recourse, I clapped my right hand over her mouth. She faintly yelped. Damn... I was ready to give up on her right there and then.

You aren't the only one who's scared out of your mind right now. Please, just bear with me. You'll get us both killed otherwise. You do realize that, don't you?

No matter how tightly I held her, she still couldn't stop shaking. My hand was now wet with her saliva, like she was really trying to scream underneath it. There were tears in her bloodshot eyes.

Realizing the impossibility of the situation, I glanced back toward the corridor in resignation... only to see that the frog-monster was no longer there. I then peered down the hall to the left just in time to see it saunter off into the darkness.

When had it passed us? I was so focused on Erin that I hadn't even noticed...

After using Enemy Search to make sure the beast was really gone, I released Erin. She frantically panted for air with ragged breaths.

"Let's go, Erin. Those other monsters are still coming."

I quickly stood up and patted her on the shoulder. My urging, however, was met with a tearful look. I thought she was going to be mad at me for covering her mouth at first, but what she said next took me completely by surprise...

"No more..."

Although she rose to her feet, her weak movements made it clear there wasn't a drop of strength left in her. This wasn't the self-assured mage I knew, and her feeble words only made me more anxious.

Two Similar Yet Different People

How long had we been on this floor now? Three days? Five? A whole week?

No, it was possible only twenty-four hours had passed. There was no sun on floor 20, just rooms and corridors that continued on without end. My sense of time was so distorted that I no longer had any idea whether it was day or night. It takes a pretty heavy toll on your mind to keep walking through the same scenery without any variation. If we hadn't been taking regular breaks, I was sure I would've hit my physical and mental limit already.

"You're sure it's okay to sleep here, right...?" Erin asked quietly.

"Yeah, don't worry. If I sense a monster approaching, I'll wake you up immediately," I assured her.

Erin was currently wrapped up in a blanket beside me. She was fragile right now, so I had to take extra care with how I treated her. I chose words carefully to minimize distress and maximize encouragement.

"All right... I'm going to sleep then."

"Goodnight, Erin."

"Goodnight..."

She pulled the blanket up over her head to block out the faint candlelight. She almost looked like a hermit crab, escaping the scary world around her by retreating into her own safe space.

I stared at the hermit crab's staff leaned up against the wall and took a similar position myself. I let out a heavy sigh, expelling all the air from my lungs.

To be honest, this is exhausting... I've nearly had it, too.

I closed my eyes and tried to rest.

I had to keep Enemy Search active at all times in order to stay alert about the threat of approaching monsters. Because of that, I hadn't gotten any proper sleep since we arrived on floor 20. Instead, I'd gotten by on naps so light that Erin could wake me with a single touch—all while keeping up Enemy Search and Stealth.

If I hadn't learned to maintain my arts even while sleeping, I would've broken already. Hell, I might still collapse from exhaustion tomorrow. The burden on my body was just that intense.

It honestly made me irritated at Erin, who was soundly asleep beside me. Whenever I was napping, I woke up as soon as a monster

entered the range of my Enemy Search. In the beginning, I would wake Erin up so we could flee, but now—as long as the enemy wasn't in a group—I would just use Stealth on us so she could keep sleeping.

Thus I'd barely gotten any sleep compared to Erin, yet I was holding up so much better than she was... That was what got under my skin. I know, I know. I just needed someone to blame. I'd been backed into a corner, so I was desperate to find *something* to be mad at. The fact that we weren't making much progress only made me more anxious, and more irritated.

We tried prioritizing routes that avoided monsters, so we'd taken some circuitous paths. Sometimes we had to retrace our steps, sometimes we had to take huge detours, and sometimes we had to wait in place. This was nothing like clearing the dungeon with the party, where we could just cut down the monsters in our path.

Moreover, we didn't actually know where the warp crystal was. There was no telling whether or not we were actually going in the right direction. It was like an escape room with no objective, and it was driving me crazy.

My only source of comfort was Mapping, which allowed me to keep track of all the routes we'd taken so far. We would never get lost this way, and I was slowly getting a handle on the layout of the floor. Theoretically speaking, as long as we kept going like this, we would find the warp crystal eventually.

Without Mapping, I would've long given up hope of ever escaping this floor. It was the first time I'd ever thought my trash skill was so useful.

I need to nap while I can. There shouldn't be any monsters passing by for a while.

I pulled a second blanket, identical to Erin's, out of my item bag. That was our second stroke of luck. Of the six Arrivers, only Neme and I had item bags, which were loaded with food and equipment for camping out in the dungeon. Since our original goal was only a light exploration of floor 17, we weren't exactly fully stocked, but Erin and I still had supplies to last us several days.

Really, fate had thrown us a line. These lucky little breaks allowed us to survive. Without any one of them, we'd be dead right now. So I tried to be grateful we could still struggle onward.

I woke up with a gasp.

My mind snapped to alertness like I'd been slapped awake. It was monsters. Close by. And not just a few of them—a whole swarm. It was too risky to try to hide with Stealth alone, so I immediately moved for Erin.

“Wake up.”

“Wha...?” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes as she rolled over to face me.

“Monsters are coming. We have to get out of here.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t give me that! We’re going! Now!”

I pulled the barely responsive Erin up by her hand. I could tell her eyes were dull and devoid of hope even in the gloomy lighting of the dungeon. She was already broken—mentally, if nothing else.

Even though I normally heard more from her than I wanted to, she hadn’t made one sharp remark over the past few days. In fact, she’d grown strangely taciturn since we were stranded in the dungeon. Practically the only time she spoke was when I talked to her first. And practically all that ever came out of her mouth were lamentations of our situation.

I was trying to keep hope alive for myself with foolhardy optimism, so I really wished she’d take my lead there. Otherwise, she might break me too.

I’d always thought Erin was more dependable than this. Apparently I had overestimated her.

She really is useless like this...

I’d never imagined she was so fragile. Taking care of her was taking its toll on me, too. I snatched up the blanket she’d been using and shoved it into the item bag. Hoping to hide my irritation, I then immediately grabbed her hand and took off running.

How long had we been on the move now?

We were currently taking a break because Erin couldn’t run anymore. She was hunched over, hands on her knees as she panted for breath. I sat beside her, stretching my shoulders. We’d made it a good distance, so I figured it would be okay to rest here for a bit.

“Could you refill this for me?” I asked, handing her a canteen.

It was Erin’s job to keep us topped off with drinking water via her magic. Having a mage around meant we wouldn’t die of thirst, at least. I know I’d said she wouldn’t be much help at the start, but it turned out she was particularly useful to have around for things like this.

“Sure...”

Erin nodded lightly and reached for her belt. She groped around in search of something, then looked stricken. She frantically felt the ground around her and checked her belt several more times.

“Wh-What?! It’s gone!”

I had a bad feeling about the desperate look in her wide eyes. Staying silent wouldn’t solve anything, however, so I had no choice but to ask...

“What’s wrong?”

“My staff! My staff is gone!”

Seriously...? Now this...?

Exasperation hit me harder than anger. When I stopped to think about it, I remembered her staff leaning against the wall beside me while we were sleeping. We’d fled in such a hurry that we must have left it behind.

“Your backup staff isn’t in this item bag, is it?”

“No, it’s in Neme’s...”

The Arrivers split their dungeoneering gear between our two item bags, and the one I carried mostly contained equipment for Jin, Roslia, and myself. If Erin could no longer use her magic, she’d be unable to do the one job she had. She really would be useless. I couldn’t let that happen.

“Then that’s that. We probably left it where we were just sleeping, so let’s go back for it once the monsters are gone.”

“I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine. I didn’t realize it either.”

I couldn’t be harsh on her when she was already withering before my eyes. It would only make me feel worse, so I instead chose the gentlest possible words I could to soothe her.

“Let’s rest for now. The monsters back there will be in the area for a while,” I said, exchanging the empty bottle in Erin’s hand for her blanket. “So go back to bed. You didn’t get enough sleep before, right?”

She’d hardly gotten two hours before I had to wake her, and it was just plain dangerous to continue around the dungeon on so little sleep.

“Thank you...” she said quietly, accepting the blanket and lying down.

I needed another hour of shuteye myself. I could think about the rest when I woke up. So, utterly exhausted in both mind and body, I fell into a light sleep with ease.

*

Several days had now passed since we retrieved Erin’s staff, and we were staring down a new problem—a food shortage. No matter how many times I checked the item bag, our stores never increased. I couldn’t help sighing. After spending roughly ten days on floor 20, there was no denying it. Our food supply had been stretched thin.

“I wonder if we can eat this ivy...” I mused, reaching for the gray ivy covering the walls. It had a crusty texture to the touch.

“As if...” Erin brushed me off with a cold mumble.

Really, I was joking around in an attempt to lighten the mood, but

it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“I was just wondering if there was any possibility.”

“No.”

“Of course not...” I sighed, releasing the ivy in my hand and watching it crumble to the ground. “Is there anything else around here that seems edible?”

“Not other than the monsters...”

The monsters, huh? Well, they are the only other thing around here...

I ruminated over Erin’s words in my head. I figured she was right. The only things that looked even remotely edible on this floor were the monsters. We’d seen five types so far. There were the bipedal frogs we saw first. Quadruped wolves made of some mineral. Demons armed with tridents. One-eyed golems. And some plant that had countless swaying... roots? Tentacles? Something.

“Monsters we can eat, huh?” I muttered in thought.

The wolf and golem were inorganic, so they surely weren’t viable options. Could we eat the demon? The frog creature and plant seemed like they might be okay too.

“The frog and the demon are edible,” Erin said, much to my surprise.

I quickly turned to question her: “Really? We can eat those?”

“Yeah, I can tell thanks to my skill...”

“Your skill?” I repeated without missing a beat.

“Minor Cooking. It tells me if something’s edible by looking at it.”

“So that actually has a use, huh?”

A jab like that ordinarily would’ve earned me Erin’s ire, but she just ignored it.

“Yeah. It also shows me various ways to prepare ingredients, so I know those two are edible. The others are no good...” she explained.

“Even the flower monster?” I asked.

“It’s poisonous, so it’s out of the question.”

Huh, so the demon and the frog were our only options. I had to trust Erin’s skill on this one. And by extension, if all she’d mentioned were those two monsters, that likely meant nothing else she’d seen on this floor was edible. I suppose it was only inevitable. We had to resign ourselves to our fate. Yet, I was surprised at how easily the words left my mouth...

“Erin, let’s fight a few monsters.”

I’d had a sneaking suspicion for a while now that things would come to this—that it would be impossible for us to make it off this floor without fighting. But there was no guarantee Erin had come to the same conclusion.

“What... are you saying?” she asked, her eyes wide with disbelief. “You’re not being serious, are you?”

“I’m dead serious.”

When she saw the resolution in my eyes, she took a step back.

“Th-Think this through! We can’t do something so rash!”

“You’re the one who needs to think this through, Erin,” I said, looking her right in the eye. I needed to be firm here. “At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before we die of starvation. That’s why we need to fight—and now, before our food is completely gone. We need to do this while we still have the energy.”

I didn’t want us to end up cornered. If we were going to hunt monsters on this floor, we had to be certain of our victory and I wanted to set us up with the best possible odds. The worst case scenario would be waiting until our food ran out to start hunting. I wanted to avoid putting us in a desperate situation where we had no food left, no chance of victory, and no choice but to fight.

But digging in and preparing for a fight was like a bald-faced acknowledgment we’d abandoned hope of the best case scenario: surviving with what food we had left and stumbling across the warp crystal by sheer luck. So in order to get Erin on board, I had to distract her from that.

“You don’t want to die, right? So we have to fight,” I said.

I knew it was underhanded. Who could argue with that? I was practically making her choice for her. And, just as expected, she nodded her head.

“Okay... So what do we do?”

I was a little unsettled by how quickly she caved, but I was to blame for forcing her hand.

“We should probably target the frog monsters. Between them and the demons, the frogs are more likely to be patrolling alone.”

Erin listened silently as I explained my plan.

“As for how we’re going to defeat one, I was thinking we could use traps. Is that doable? If so, I think it’s the simplest and safest method...”

I was thinking about how Erin had created magic traps during my Trap Dismantling training, but she shook her head at the prospect.

“It’s impossible. If I expended enough magical energy to make a trap, it would lure all the monsters in the area straight to us.”

Damn... I’d thought it was a good plan, too.

“Trap magic is actually super inefficient. The special mechanics of spells that activate upon contact or require being set for long periods of time take more magical energy, so their overall power is much weaker than comparable attack spells. That’s why I’d have to use about twice as much magical energy to deal a commensurate amount of damage to a monster via a trap.”

“So how strong would a trap be if you used just enough energy to

avoid luring the monsters?”

“I don’t know specifically... and I’m not sure what kind of resistances the monsters on this floor have. But if you helped me with Stealth, I might be able to make something of moderate power.”

What should we do? Are traps viable after all?

An image of the frog monster surfaced in my mind. Its thick legs were clearly made for jumping. I’d considered the possibility of setting several traps spaced apart to wear down its health, but I just couldn’t see it working. The frog monster would surely retreat with its superior leaping strength when the first trap was sprung. And if it fled the area where we set the trap, all our work would be for naught. We’d be risking everything with nothing to show for it.

So, instead, I started to think it would be better to set one trap to restrain the monster. Erin should have no problem taking it down once it was immobilized. It was a riskier plan for sure, but it was still a good compromise. It was better than having Erin try to fight it outright, after all.

“If you used your regular magic, do you think you could take out a single frog without attracting the attention of the other monsters?”

“Hmm... Yeah, I think I could.”

That settled it. I would have preferred a more certain plan, but this was the best we could manage under the circumstances. We had to play with the cards we’d been dealt.

I tried to stay as silent as possible, taking deep, slow, purposeful breaths only when I had to. The frog monster was slowly approaching the trap we’d set.

Erin and I had been waiting with bated breath around the corner of a T-junction all this time. A frog was finally passing through, and it was presently about fifty meters away. Since she was a long-ranged attacker, this distance put Erin at an unparalleled advantage. As long as the frog didn’t have any similar attacks, we should be perfectly safe here. Erin had said she could eliminate the monster with one hit at this range.

“It’s almost there.”

With the wall in the way, we couldn’t actually see anything from around the corner. I was keeping tabs on the frog via Enemy Search and the map in my head.

I was nervous. My palms were drenched with sweat. Failure here could mean death, and the chances of that happening were considerable. This was literally a fight for our lives. I’d never had a battle this close to death before. Would it really work? Would it be better to quietly back down now?

I wiped my palms on my pants, hoping to rub away my doubts

too. Then I glanced at Erin, who had to be more nervous than I was. This plan relied entirely on her. The pressure I was feeling was nothing compared to that.

Erin's pupils were blown wide, her teeth clenched down on her lip. I wanted to ask if she was okay, but this really wasn't the time. The frog creature was just one step away from the trap...

Chk!

A sharp crackling sound reached my ears—a sign Erin's ice trap had caught the monster.

"Erin!"

When I called her name, it gave her quite a start. She was waiting with just enough energy charged up in her staff to cast a spell that wouldn't attract monsters, and she leaped around the corner on my signal. I was right on her heels.

"Light Brand!"

A faint mass of light fired from the end of her staff in a straight line for the frog at a speed that couldn't be called fast by any measure. The frog creature was unable to move, however. Its legs were frozen, leaving it with no way to evade the incoming spell. Erin's light thrust forward until it plunged into the frog's emerald green body. It then burst into countless shards, each of which pierced through the monster. Fragments flew in every direction, splattering blood with them.

Relieved her job was done, Erin relaxed her shoulders.

No, not yet... This isn't over!

Sensing the hostility of an enemy on the verge of death made me shudder. The frog wasn't finished.

"Withdraw, Withdraw, Withdraw, Withdraw, Withdraw, Withdraw!" I yelled reflexively.

I grabbed Erin and leaped backward repeatedly with all my might, trying to get as far away as I could. I had no idea what was happening and I wasn't thinking of the consequences. There was only one imperative in my head: "move or die." My flight instincts had kicked into high gear.

And rightfully so. Before I knew it, there was a sharp sword sailing toward me. It stopped barely a single centimeter away from my nose. I stared at its point, dumbfounded. It wasn't a sword after all... it was a tongue.

I slowly began to process that the frog had tried to attack me. Just how far was its reach? I'd thought we were safe at this distance, but I was way off the mark. I couldn't help the dry laugh that escaped my lips. I never anticipated a hidden long-ranged attack like this. If I'd taken another split second to react or used Withdraw one less time, my head would have been impaled right now.

Staring down death at such close range made my mind go fuzzy with fear, but the sound of cracking ice snapped me back to my senses. The frog was struggling with all its might to break free of the trap at its feet.

I forced my constricting lungs to suck in air, then shouted...

“Erin, cast something! Hurry!”

“Oh...”

My voice seemed to call her back from her own state of shock, and she quickly began pouring energy into her staff in a panic. No sooner than she finished preparing a second spell, the frog broke free and shot forward like a bullet. Erin closed her eyes and unleashed her attack. There was a tremendous roar as the frog crashed into her thunderbolt... and was blasted apart. Charred flesh splattered against my cheek.

“Phew... That was close...”

I stared at the scattered pieces of its body on the ground, waiting to make sure it wouldn't regenerate and come after us again. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Erin stumble backward and sink to the ground.

“Let's hurry and collect the edible meat.”

Seeing the scattered monster flesh quashed my appetite rather than stimulated it. Erin had blown the monster into such smithereens that it hardly looked like there was anything left to eat. But we'd risked our lives for this meat; we certainly couldn't just leave it here. We had to gather what we could before other monsters came to check out the commotion. Fortunately, there were no signs of anything approaching yet.

I took a spare knife from the item bag and handed it to Erin. She could tell which cuts of meats were edible, so harvesting them was her role. It was my job to stand watch with Enemy Search. Erin collected chunks of meat, froze them with her magic to preserve them, and then handed them over to me to stow.

“With this little, we may need to go hunting again...”

Those words left my mouth absentmindedly. I wasn't paying attention to what I said; I was just thinking out loud. It only took a moment, however, for me to realize I should've kept my mouth shut.

“No more...!”

Hearing that pained wail, I turned to Erin standing next to me. *She's... crying...*

Tears were streaming down her face. It was so contrary to her proud, beautiful character that I could hardly believe it. My hand reflexively reached for her, but paused midair.

“No more... I don't want to fight anymore... Let's just stop...”

I couldn't stand to watch her give up hope and fall apart like this.

I struggled for the words to comfort her.

“If we stop... we’ll never make it out alive, you know?”

I just needed her to keep her chin up. To keep looking forward. I knew she was feeling the despair and frustration of being trapped here. That’s all it was... At least, that’s what I wanted to believe.

“I know... That’s why I said it... Let’s just give up! Let’s drop the delusions and make peace with it already!”

But reality was cruel. I was wrong; Erin was at her limit. She couldn’t take any more of floor 20.

“Struggling like this is pointless! It’s just drawing out the misery! We can risk our lives all we want! We’re just going to die in the end anyway! We’re never going home!”

There was no stopping the torrent of emotion once the dam burst.

“This is awful! It’s like I’m slowly suffocating! I just want it to end! Don’t you feel the same? Let’s just give up together. Come on...”

“Erin...”

No, I don’t feel the same way.

That was all I could think, but I couldn’t say it so heartlessly to her tear-streaked face.

“Please... This is the last thing I’ll ever ask of you... I’ll do anything in return... Let’s just give up together...”

The only words I could wring out were an unreasonable request for her to be level-headed.

“Erin, calm down. Think rationally.”

My plea fell on deaf ears. She smacked away my hands on her shoulders.

“How can I?! There’s no way anyone could be rational in this situation! Thinking calmly right now is the least sane thing we could do!” She then grabbed my sleeve and continued to hound me. “You know, I’ve always thought you were weird, Note! Always! And now I know I was right! You’re not normal at all!”

“I’m not normal...?”

What is she saying? I don’t follow...

“No, you’re not normal in the slightest! We’re on the verge of death here! I’ve been out of my mind this entire time, yet you’ve been perfectly cool! There’s no way that’s *not* abnormal! Honestly, it’s scary! How can you be so calm at a time like this?! Don’t you feel anything at all?!”

Erin was wrong. I hadn’t kept my cool. I panicked just like she did when we first ended up on this floor, and my anxiety and irritation had been building ever since. I simply stifled my emotions in order to survive—that was all. I opened my mouth to try to explain, but Erin just kept going...

“I haven’t understood you since day one, Note! What’s wrong with

you? How can you just keep trudging on like that? How do you do it? I just don't get it..."

I was right to stay silent. She was criticizing me for ignoring my feelings in service of my goals. The fat teardrops rolling down her cheeks spoke to the strength of her own emotions, and she tried in vain to wipe them away with the hem of her sleeve, dirtied and torn after several days in the dungeon.

"I first realized it after I lectured you for getting arrested."

That was around eight months ago now, but I could still remember it clearly. She was talking about the time she'd told me I was slacking off in my training. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"Honestly, Note, I thought you would leave the party after that. No, I *wanted* you to quit, so I said those harsh things to you on purpose. But you didn't. You didn't even falter. You just wholeheartedly devoted yourself to learning arts alone..."

That much was true. I ignored how she felt about me personally and threw myself into my training. I didn't care what she thought of me; I just focused on learning to activate arts simultaneously, which actually dropped my performance and made her hate me more.

"I just don't get how you could do something like that. Didn't it bother you that I hated you? Doesn't that kind of thing scare you?" she asked, turning my way with teary eyes.

She seemed almost repentant, or perhaps pleading. And with each word she uttered, it felt like something important within my chest was being peeled away.

"I thought the same when we all went to the beach together. And I think the same right now. You detach yourself from your emotions to get things done. That's what's so strange... I could never do that. Doesn't it hurt? Isn't it suffocating? Don't you ever want to give up? How can you keep going?"

You're wrong, Erin. I'm much weaker than you think. I'm not so ascetic that I can completely let go of my emotions. There's just one thing that separates me from you...

"It's because I made a mistake in the past that I'll never be able to fix. You know the story, don't you? Because I was weak—because I didn't try—I let down someone I loved. As a result, I lost the one thing that was truly important to me."

I recalled saying goodbye to my childhood friend Miya. That changed me. It made me into who I was today.

Miya made me realize just how hopeless I was. How pathetic and lazy. And I blamed it all on my circumstances, sulking because I didn't get a skill I wanted. If she hadn't held me accountable for that, I would've lived my whole life making excuses and achieving nothing, taking it out on the people around me. I wouldn't stay a loser forever.

Looking back on it now, she really was too good for me. She was still helping me even when she wasn't around. In comparison, I'd never been able to offer her anything. That fact filled me with unbearable sadness. I never wanted to feel that frustration ever again. I wanted to repay the Arrivers, who were taking care of me just like Miya had. That was the driving force that kept me going.

"You want to know if it hurts? If it's suffocating?" I asked. "You're damn right! It's awful! But I've been through a lot worse, so I'm sure as hell not giving up over this. I'm not ever giving up again."

"I see... You've experienced failure before, so you don't let it get to you..."

"Exactly."

I replied to her with confidence. I believed that by laying my heart bare like this, I might actually reach her through her despair. It was a desperate play to get her to understand me... A naive delusion.

"I'm certain of it now. You really are weird, Note. No normal person would be able to persevere through all of this just because they'd failed once before! That's not enough to keep someone going!"

The corners of Erin's mouth curled into a sneer, betraying all my hope. I'd opened up to her honestly, yet she still didn't understand me...

Why?

I couldn't help getting emotional, raising my voice roughly.

"What are you trying to say, Erin? I'm no different from anyone else! What the hell is 'normal' anyway?! I just keep trying because I've tasted failure and I don't care to again! What's so weird about that? A privileged little girl like you would never—" I shouted.

"You think I don't know anything about failure?" she interrupted me, her words ice cold.

I had trouble believing my ears. That was the sternest tone she'd ever taken with me, and that was saying something. Where had I gone wrong? My gut told me I'd said something I couldn't take back.

"I've had my fair share. In fact, I bet I've had it worse than you, Note. What? Did you really think you were the most unfortunate person on the planet?"

She had me there. I couldn't really say anything in my own defense. I might not have said I was the *most* unfortunate person, but if there were only a hundred people in this world... I would have guessed I was in the 96th or 97th percentile.

"I know how you feel because I've been through tragedy too. But there's one thing you should know. Even if they didn't get a trash skill like you did, even if they were lucky enough to get incredible skills... *everyone* out there has failed at something. Some have failed badly enough," she continued, "that it's enough to crush them. No two

people handle things the same way, you know. Just look at me. I was blessed with superior skills and ran away from home to live an easy life, but here I am... utterly useless.”

I no longer knew who was standing in front of me. The Erin Fortlord I knew was determined, competitive, and overflowing with pride. But this girl was weak, fragile, and empty. The genius mage I respected was nowhere to be found.

“You know, I was bullied back in magic school...”

The sudden change in topic left me unable to hide my confusion. But, figuring she’d brought it up for a reason, I just listened quietly.

“I was never really sure why... Probably my personality, I guess. Funny to hear myself say it, but I know it can be nasty. I always say what’s on my mind, and that tends to rub people the wrong way.”

I hated seeing Erin sneer at herself like this. I’d always admired her confidence... and that image was melting away with her tears.

“It started with people talking behind my back. Then they started bad-mouthing me to my face, and it was full-blown harassment before I knew it. I was isolated from the class, ignored, treated like I didn’t exist. My belongings would disappear on a daily basis. Precious childhood mementos were destroyed. There were even times I got beaten up.”

I knew what I was feeling was probably selfish. In reality, I’d likely misunderstood Erin from the beginning. She always talked a strong game, so I’d just assumed she was strong enough to back up the talk.

“Being who I am, I went to the teachers first thing. I wasn’t just going to quietly take the way people were treating me. In fact, I went to the teachers every time and told them who did it. And the teachers always gave the other students a slap on the wrist. That was their job. But no one stops bullying someone just because a teacher scolded them. The real root of the problem—me—was still there.”

In reality... she was actually a delicate girl whose hurt ran deep.

“I was the reason I was being bullied, so there was no hope for me. You can’t just change your personality overnight. It’s not like I wanted to be this way...”

I suddenly saw Erin for who she really was, without all the armor she wore to shield herself. I opened my mouth to say something, but she continued before I could find the words.

“You know... Those days were hard, but they weren’t all bad. Even a brash girl like me had a single friend among all the people who hated me. Crazy, right? She was a nice, quiet girl, so she didn’t get along with the other students well herself. We initially bonded as losers in arms, but we became good friends because of it.”

Even though she was now talking fondly of an old friend, her tone

was sorrowful. Her very expression radiated grief.

"I always had fun with her. She helped me forget about my pain. We could talk for *days* about magic. We even had a friendly rivalry over who could get better grades. It didn't matter who came out on top. We were just having fun. We shared happiness over the most trivial things. Thinking back on it... those were some of the best moments of my life."

That's enough, Erin... You don't have to say any more...

That's all I could think. I could only guess at what tragedy came next based on the look on her face.

"That terrible pattern—the misery of being bullied dotted with the joy of friendship—continued until I turned fifteen. It all came to an end at my presentation ceremony," she said, gouging at her own heart and tearing open invisible wounds with every word. "I received two of the best skills a mage can get, and things changed quickly for me after that. I was basically guaranteed a successful career as a mage at that point. My classmates suddenly started being nice to me and the teachers started praising me as the pride of the school—even though I was the bane of their existence just days prior. And what do you think I did when I heard their shameless flattery?"

I was flustered by the sudden question. In a panic, I answered, "You brushed them off coldly?"

But that was clearly wrong. Erin shook her head.

"No, Note. The opposite. I accepted it all gladly. I happily chatted with my classmates during breaks, joined them for group work, and hung out with them after school... all at the cost of cutting off my only real friend."

That seemed to be the lingering cause of her regret. But contrary to my expectations, that wasn't where her story ended.

"Humans work in mysterious ways, you see. It's almost like we don't know how to band together unless we have an enemy to unite against. And when I was no longer everyone's common enemy... who do you think that title fell upon? The poor girl who used to be my friend was the next to be bullied. They may have even gone after her because of her relationship with me."

At this point, Erin had stopped crying. Only pale streaks remained on her cheeks. It seemed she simply had nothing left to cry, but even then, her voice was still tearful.

"I pretended to be oblivious to it. Worse... I even participated in it. I didn't refuse the orders of the classmates who'd bullied me the same way. Because I was scared, you know? What if I refused them and they turned on me again? I couldn't live through that hell a second time. That's what I told myself back then."

There, Erin hung her head in her hands and sobbed.

“I still remember the last thing I said to her—words I’ll never be able to take back. I told her that we were never really friends. That I only hung out with her because she didn’t have anyone else. I told her not to talk to me anymore... And do you know what she said to me in return? She said, ‘I’m sorry I was such a nuisance to you. You were always such a good friend to me, Erin. Thank you for everything.’”

Erin paused there for a moment, then raised her voice emotionally.

“Why?! Why did she thank me?! Why did she have to apologize to me?! I should’ve been the one apologizing! I should have thanked *her*! So I made up my mind to say it all the next day, even though I knew she would probably never forgive me...”

She wrung out her heart to finish telling me her story.

“But I never got the chance. She didn’t come to school the next day or the day after that... She quit school altogether shortly after. She was a dorm student because her family lived far away, so I never saw her again. I never got to tell her how sorry I was.”

I couldn’t criticize Erin for what she’d done. I too had put my best friend through hell. We’d both betrayed people we cared deeply about without ever getting the opportunity to make up for it.

“She loved magic so much, but she gave up studying it because of me! I should have been the one to disappear! If I had, everyone else would have been happy!”

I was starting to get angry. I was mad at what was making Erin say such terrible things. Even if what she’d done was unforgivable to someone else... I had pity and mercy for her. I wanted her to forgive herself. Whether it was because she was a fellow party member, because I related to her story, or just because I thought she’d paid enough for her sins... I didn’t know. They were all perfectly applicable, yet each insufficient.

“After that, I got sick of everything and quit school too. I ended up wandering into the Arrivers, and even though I wasn’t specifically interested in dungeon diving, I felt a sense of obligation to succeed with magic after stealing it away from her. Perhaps that’s why I introduced myself by claiming I wanted to prove I was the strongest mage in the world... Not even I believe that crap. I ran away from school, my best chance to learn magic, and I hardly bothered to train myself. Honestly, I’m a joke.”

I was shocked at this revelation. My introduction to the Arrivers was my first vague step toward finding purpose in my life. I felt a twinge of betrayal to hear that was a little fabricated now, but Erin’s confession didn’t stop there.

“And that’s not the only lie I’ve told. Especially to you, Note...”

“To me?”

“Yeah. You know, I wanted to kick you out of the party before...”

“You mean when you got mad at me for slacking off?”

“No. From the very beginning, the day you joined the party.

Really, even before that.”

I peered into Erin’s eyes and saw that they were hollow. She’d vomited out all of her emotion, leaving practically nothing left inside of her.

“Honestly, I really hate suck-ups. Average people throw themselves at the feet of their superiors to try to get ahead without a care for who they hurt in the process. I didn’t want anything to do with people like that, so I figured I’d be fine in a party of top-tier adventurers like the Arrivers. And then you barged in, Note. That’s why I wanted to get rid of you.”

“Get... rid of me?”

“You still remember, right? What I said in the kitchen that first night? I told you that I was opposed to you joining. I told you the same thing when you were arrested. Didn’t you think I was being a little unfair? I was *looking* for a reason to kick you out, so I latched on to every little thing.”

Thinking back on my relationship with Erin, everything she’d ever said to me... Now that I had the context for it, my view of her was slowly starting to change. I thought I’d understood her all this time, but I’d only ever scratched the surface of who she really was.

“That’s why I was so rude to you. But I was wrong, Note. You’re not like my classmates. Far from it, in fact. You’re much stronger than me, who tried to drag someone else down.”

“You think I’m strong?”

I was going to argue, but Erin shut me down before I could.

“Yeah. While I was running from my guilt and squandering all my time, you were confronting your flaws and working hard to change them. I haven’t refined a single spell since joining the Arrivers, yet you’ve worked around the clock to master your arts. And now... you’ve changed, but I’m still the same.”

“I don’t deserve any of this praise, Erin. You’re far stronger than me in a fight—”

“I’m weak, Note. Even if I best you in terms of skills, there’s no meaning to it if I lose out in heart. People need talent, sure, but you have to work hard to get anywhere with it. If you don’t put in the effort, whatever talent you have is just wasted.”

It seemed, at last, Erin had finally broken down every protective wall she’d ever built up around herself. She’d finally said what she’d always needed to say.

“You have talent and you work hard, Note. You’ll go far. I guarantee it. You have a future ahead of you... so leave me here and

escape by yourself. I'm sure you'll be fine on your own. It'll be even easier to sneak around without me. I didn't want to die alone in this dark place... but it's a fitting end for me, don't you think?"

"What are you saying?! You're coming with me, Erin—"

"It's impossible. I've given up already. Just leave me here."

Watching Erin plead like this... I finally, truly, saw through her. I saw the weight of the burden she carried, what she thought of herself, and what she thought of me. I had to correct her, though.

"I'm not strong, Erin. I was just lucky. I was only able to change because I joined the Arrivers. That's all. And you're just like me before I met all of you."

Erin was exactly like I used to be. Hurt from hurting someone else, and so full of regret.

"We're not so different. I was weak and couldn't face myself, but meeting all of you changed that—that's the only thing that separates us."

"But I didn't change even after meeting the Arrivers! I couldn't! I'm still the same weakling I used to be! *That's* the difference between us! You were able to change because of who you are, and I'm still the same because of who I am!"

"You're wrong! It's not about you! For better or for worse, we change because of the people around us! All you get to change is how you let them influence you!"

I returned Erin's emotional look with an intense gaze.

"That's why the Arrivers were salvation for me, but not for you. It's like... the slight misalignment of buttons on a shirt. If any little thing had been different, our positions could have been reversed. You might've been the one with an open heart, and I might've shut mine away."

I pulled a trash skill and betrayed my best friend; Erin got great skills and betrayed hers. I joined the Arrivers and was able to change a little; Erin joined the Arrivers... and was still the same. We were hopelessly similar. So similar, yet our paths were so different. It was so, so very sad.

She was still struggling. She didn't know how to free herself of her pain, and I understood that all too well. It gnaws away at you until you'd just rather not exist... It's so vivid and unbearable.

I felt great pity for Erin, who was ready to give up everything in the face of what seemed like unsurmountable despair. I wanted to save her. I couldn't let her die so miserably. I wouldn't let her die without truly living.

"I believe, Erin, that if you keep on living, you'll meet your equivalent of what the Arrivers were for me."

That's what I believed. I had to. If a young girl could die in this

world without ever even learning to accept herself... No, even if the world allowed it, I wouldn't stand for it.

"If I keep on living... there's still no hope we'll ever get off this floor..."

"You don't need hope. You have me. I'll get you off this floor—no matter what I have to do or what I have to sacrifice. I'll get you out of here. So, just believe in me. You can do that much, right? You said I was strong, remember?"

I gave her a strained laugh, and she actually laughed too. It was the first time I'd seen her smile on this floor.

"You really are an idiot..."

"Can't argue. Now, let's work on getting home... to Puriff, where everyone's waiting for us."

A World for Two

It had now been about two weeks since I promised to get Erin home alive. There was no real way of telling time here, but a month must have passed since we first ended up on floor 20. Through pure luck, we were both still alive—without any major injuries, even. So we pressed onward, continuing to search for a way out.

I clenched my fists over and over again, relieved I still had strength in them. That meant I could keep fighting.

I signaled to Erin, who was across from me on the other side of the T-junction. A monster was currently approaching from the perpendicular corridor, and my signal was to let Erin know it was almost at her trap. She signaled back to me in the affirmative—a slow nod that I could just barely see from the shadows where she was waiting.

I then heard a snapping sound several times louder than it should have been in the otherwise empty and silent hallway. Erin's trap had worked.

Okay!

Without missing a beat, I leaped forward and darted around the corner. A frog monster had its legs frozen in ice and was struggling to escape.

Blink!

I closed in on it in one bound using an art I'd seen Jin use many a time. The frog flinched a little when I suddenly appeared in front of it. Monsters normally fixate on the first target they see, so I was certain it was locked on to me now. As proof, a light pink blur came streaking toward me...

Stream!

I activated another evasion art I'd burned into my memory and dodged the frog's razor-like tongue. Not a moment too soon, either. I'd so narrowly avoided the attack that droplets of saliva splattered against my cheek. But I didn't let that stop me; I continued to move like a stream, flowing past the frog on its right side. I looked into its goggling yellow eye...

Not a second later, a slow-moving ball of light that had been following me made contact with the frog's face. This was Erin's Light Brand spell. Whatever absorbed it would be rent asunder from the inside.

And right on cue, the frog monster burst into a storm of magical blades. I knew, however, that wouldn't be enough to kill it. The monsters here were tougher than anything we'd ever faced before. There was no way Erin's spell—intentionally suppressed to keep from attracting the attention of other foes—would take it out in one hit. That meant the rest was up to me. This was the decisive moment.

I'll kill you. No matter what.

I mustered all the hostility I could manage and directed it at the frog in front of me.

Bloodlust...

This was an assassin's mainstay aggro art. I hadn't seen Jin use it much—maybe once or twice at most. So I was essentially relying on my intuition here, but I was still fairly confident. Imitating someone wasn't the only way to learn arts, after all. They could be acquired naturally if you had the right feel for them.

Of late, I'd devoted myself to practicing Stealth, an art that negated my presence. That was paying off now in a major way. Bloodlust, you see, was basically just the inverse of Stealth. It intensified my presence.

The frog monster's gaze flickered to Erin briefly before returning to me.

Good, it worked.

I'd managed to keep aggro. I mentally pumped my fist in the air as the frog lashed at me with its tongue once again. I didn't have much to worry about this time, however. With its legs frozen in Erin's trap, the frog couldn't turn around. It was more or less aiming blindly now that I was behind it, making its attacks easy to avoid with Stream.

I dodged each one carefully, calmly, and deftly. I raised my right hand to parry the next incoming attack just as Erin's second spell came flying. The frog's corpse then fell dead on the floor, a spear of ice impaled through its head.

"That was perfect. You did great, Erin," I called.

"Thanks," a quiet voice replied.

Everything had gone exactly according to plan. Once the monster was caught in the trap, I drew its attention so Erin could finish it off with another spell. We'd grown fairly accustomed to hunting frogs this way, and I felt an odd sense of satisfaction as I stretched my shoulders after the fight.

My arts were improving with each and every encounter, to the point they almost felt like second nature now. I handed Erin the knife to harvest the frog's flesh. Her butchering skills were getting better too—proof we were both growing used to our life on floor 20.

Relieved for the time being, I called out to Erin as she worked.

"Let's rest for a while after this."

“Sure. I’ll make this quick, then.”

Erin wasn’t quite back to her normal self yet, but some vigor had returned to her voice. She was much more mentally stable, too. It was a stark difference from the first time we’d fought a frog monster—almost like she’d been exorcised of some demon. It was a relief, honestly.

Once Erin finished gathering the meat, we changed locations and found somewhere to hide. There weren’t many monsters in this area, so I figured we could get some sleep here. I slumped down against the wall, and Erin followed my lead.

“You doing okay?” I asked, watching her face.

She stretched her arms out in front of herself and asked in turn, “With what?”

“With... everything.”

“Well, it’s not like I can say I’m thrilled to be here... but things are a little easier now thanks to you, Note,” she said with a somewhat bashful smile.

It seemed she was recalling her emotional outburst with a bit of embarrassment.

“But, gosh, my feet hurt! We’ve been walking all this time,” she hurriedly continued, pulling off her shoes as she complained.

One look at them made it clear what we’d been through. Her shoes were worn completely ragged from day after day of nonstop walking. They were on the verge of falling apart.

“Your shoes are just about done for.”

“Yeah. It’s too bad I don’t have my spare gear...”

My item bag only held equipment for me, Jin, and Roslia. Erin’s was in the item bag Neme carried, so I couldn’t help her with footwear. I’d given her Roslia’s spare clothes already, but her boots were the wrong size for Erin. She’d been making do, but...

“Ugh, it’s gotten even worse,” she grumbled as she removed her dirty socks.

Her bare feet were red and blistered from her worn-out shoes.

“Here, let me clean you up. We don’t want anything getting infected,” I offered.

“Thanks,” she said, tossing her feet into my lap.

I’d been helping her out like this lately. I took out a towel from the bag, Erin dampened it with a water spell, and I then used it to wipe her sore feet.

“Ow!” she yelped.

“Don’t move,” I fussed.

“I can’t help it. That stings,” she replied in a pout.

“Sure makes you appreciate Neme’s healing magic, huh?”

“Yeah, we rely on her too much. We didn’t bring any first aid for

ourselves.”

“Yet there’s so much other junk in this bag...”

As we talked, I thought about how much closer we’d gotten recently. Before this whole mishap, Erin never would have let me touch her. And even if she had, she would’ve chewed me out the second I caused her pain. But now we were casually chatting without a word of complaint as I tended to her feet. The difference was night and day, like she’d really opened up to me.

The old Erin protected herself by keeping others at bay, but this Erin didn’t push me away at all. It was almost like something was actually pulling us together, even physically. We used to keep each other at arm’s length, but now we practically sat shoulder to shoulder. It was... actually kind of nice. After hearing Erin’s story, I think I opened my heart a little to her too.

To be honest, I’d always respected the Arrivers, but I’d never felt particularly close to any of them. It felt like they were on another level, almost in a different world. Unreachable. But when Erin bared her heart to me, I realized we weren’t so different. She carried the burden of regrets and failures just like I did. We had more in common than I ever realized.

“All right. All done,” I let her know when I was done washing her feet.

“Thank you, Note, for doing even this...”

I didn’t think it was a big deal, but she lowered her head meekly as she thanked me.

“Don’t mention it.”

I wasn’t used to Erin being so honest with her gratitude. It made me feel a little fidgety. Granted, it was still better than the sharp words that used to fly from her mouth every time she talked to me.

“You’ve really softened up, y’know, Erin?”

“Are you saying I’ve gotten chubby? I’m pretty sure I’ve lost weight since coming here.”

“No, I meant your personality.”

“Oh...”

She pondered my words without the slightest hint of anger. I could practically hear it now. If she’d misunderstood me like that before, she would’ve roared, “How dare you call me fat?!”

“Despite everything, I really am grateful to you, Note,” she said instead. “More than you could ever imagine.”

“I don’t think I’ve done anything you need to thank me for.”

“You listened to me vent my whole pathetic life story. You encouraged me. You even promised to get me home.”

“I haven’t actually made good on that yet.”

“It still made me happy. And we’ve survived this far, haven’t we?”

she said with a smile.

Seeing her be so upfront with her feelings, seeing her smile like that... actually got me thinking about how cute she was.

"Say, Erin, is there anything you want to do once we get out of the dungeon?" I asked suddenly.

"Anything I want to do? Hmm, how come?"

"I thought it might be nice to work toward a goal."

I wanted her to be able to smile outside of the dungeon too. Our lives would continue on after we escaped floor 20, and I hated the idea of Erin going through her days continuing to shoulder such despair and self-contempt. It was just too sad. I wanted her to have hope in her daily life too, so I was searching for hints about what might give her that.

"Well, nothing really comes to mind..."

"I see..."

That was a little disappointing, but I supposed it wasn't easy to come up with on the spot. It was all right if she took her time trying to find it.

"Oh!" she then suddenly exclaimed, looking my way with bright, wide eyes. "There is one thing."

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"Will you help me if I tell you?"

"Of course," I replied without hesitation.

"Okay, then... I want a boyfriend."

"That's not what I thought you were going to say..."

"But I've never had a boyfriend before, so I want to know what it's like. I want to experience love for myself."

"Then I'll help you find it."

"That's not what I thought you were going to say..."

What? What *did* she want to hear then? Did she want me to refuse her after all, or...?

"What about you, Note? Is there something you want to do once we get out of here?"

"Yeah, lots of things. I might even want a girlfriend myself..."

"What, really?" Erin asked with a laugh...

And I was drawn into laughing right along with her.

"Is it that weird?" I asked, still laughing.

"No, it isn't. It just made me happy, that's all. I'll help you find love too, Note."

"Thanks. It's always reassuring to know you've got my back, Erin."

"Mm... I've basically already gotten what I wanted."

Our hands brushed against one another, gently coming to rest on top of each other... and I couldn't help thinking it would be nice if our

feelings connected the same way.

*

The faint happiness we'd found together couldn't continue forever, which was both a good and bad thing.

I checked via Mapping over and over, but I saw the same thing each and every time I looked. There was no way around it—literally. There was really no escaping it. I fought back the urge to slump over in disappointment and instead grit my teeth.

I'd known this was a possibility all along, so I couldn't let it get to me. I just had to channel my lost hope into conviction. I took a deep breath, gathered my wits, steeled my nerves, and then turned to the girl holding my hand.

"Erin, I found the warp crystal."

"What?! Really?!" she exclaimed, yanking on my right arm in a joyous outburst. "You're not joking around, are you? We can finally go home?"

"No, I'm not joking. I really have found the warp crystal," I said with a vague nod in response, "but we can't go home just yet."

"What do you mean?"

"To put it simply, the mid-boss is between us and the crystal. In other words, there's no avoiding a fight."

Enemy Search had revealed to me the presence of a strong monster. I recognized the new gimmick we'd encountered on floor 16—the mid-boss—and this one was sitting in a large room directly between us and escape. A trailing corridor connected the warp crystal chamber to the mid-boss room, and several more winding corridors branched off from the mid-boss room. These twisting passageways formed the labyrinth that was floor 20, and this setup ensured that no matter which route you took, you'd have to cross the mid-boss before reaching the crystal.

I've been hoping all this time that that wasn't the case. To think an entire month of wandering this floor would come to this...

The mid-boss was just on the edge of my map when we'd first arrived on floor 20, so I'd had a sneaking suspicion all along in spite of my hope... but here we were, staring down harsh reality. I resigned myself to it as I faithfully explained the situation to Erin.

"All right," she said readily.

"You, uh, don't seem very upset about it," I remarked, a little taken aback.

"Why should I be? I already decided to trust you, and you promised we'd make it home together."

Her eyes were no longer hollow and empty. There was a light in them now that outshone her hopelessness. She was beginning to

change... and for the better.

If she could keep this up even outside the dungeon, I was confident she'd be able to face her past. She'd be able to transform herself. That was why I couldn't let her die here. She had to escape this place. That was my one meager yet grand wish.

"So, what do we do? Is there a plan?" she asked.

"I do have a plan," I replied with a nod. "But the odds aren't in our favor."

"Let's do it. It's the best plan you could come up with under the circumstances, right?"

"Yeah, it is. Here goes: I'll occupy the mid-boss while you head for the warp crystal. There are no monsters between the mid-boss room and the path to the safe zone around the crystal, so you'll be scot-free as long as you make it there."

"But... you promised we'd go back together..." she muttered quietly with a look of betrayal on her face, her right fist clenched tightly.

"Listen, it's not what it sounds like. I plan on keeping my promise," I assured her. "There's no guarantee I'll make it, but I have no intention of dying here. Once I know you've made it to safety, I'll shake the mid-boss and follow after you."

"But if you can't shake it, then—"

"Yeah, I might die. But this strategy still gives us both the best shot at survival."

"We can't fight it together?" she asked pleadingly.

"No way, no how. From what I can tell through Enemy Search, this mid-boss is at *least* as strong as the boss on floor 16. It's way too reckless to take it on with just the two of us. That's why I won't fight—I'll run."

"You'll run?"

"Yeah. I won't be earnestly fighting the mid-boss. I'm just going to keep its attention with Bloodlust and use my evasive arts to buy time. It'll be a piece of cake compared to trying to defeat it."

I'd honed my evasion techniques considerably through our repeated battles against the frog monsters. I knew the odds were against me, but I didn't consider my defeat a foregone conclusion.

Moreover, I'd sparred with Jin hundreds of times and he was far faster with Shadow Runner than any monster I'd ever seen. Thanks to him, I was actually able to follow the attacks of the foes on this floor with some competence.

And my training wasn't my only edge right now. The constant, looming fear of death had sharpened my senses to an almost supernatural level. I was confident I'd be able to outperform myself from just a month ago.

The first time the Arrivers took me into the dungeon, Force told me that Jin had cheated death countless times. That that was the secret to his strength. And... I finally understood what he meant.

I too had grown in the process of testing fate over and over again. There would be no telling just how fast the mid-boss was until I tangled with it, but I was ready for another test. I was ready for the challenge.

"I can trust you, right, Note...? You're not going to die on me, are you...?"

"Don't worry, Erin. I promise you we're both making it home alive."

This could be the last night's sleep I ever get...

That was the thought creeping through my mind as I pulled our blanket out of the item bag. We'd been down here so long that it was blackened with dirt. This would be our final reprieve before the mid-boss, but I was confident we could get some shuteye without any other monsters around. And so we laid down to sleep, Erin stretched out beside me like always.

"I told myself I wouldn't say anything weak-hearted, but will you let me get one thing off my chest?" Erin asked as she turned my way.

Her breath tickled my ear. The pleasant sensation made me squirm a little.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You're set on taking on the mid-boss, aren't you?"

"I'm not going to fight it. I told you I'm going to run."

"But that still means you're taking it on," she said, squeezing my hand. "You know... I was thinking that life down here isn't so bad."

"What do you mean?"

"Being this close, being able to talk about silly things or whatever..."

"Really?" I understood what she meant, but I couldn't help asking. "There's no sunlight or proper food here. We never know when we'll be attacked by monsters, and we haven't even been able to bathe. To be blunt, don't you think this place is kind of the worst?"

"But we've been together this whole time. It's even pretty peaceful since we've been able to avoid monsters lately."

"It'd be no different in the outside world."

"That's true, but one thing's definitely going to be different..."

"What's that?"

"Down here, it's just the two of us."

Just the two of us...

Those words sank strangely into my heart. It was true that we were the only people here... like this world was ours, and ours alone.

If we stayed here, we'd continue caring for each other without ever being disturbed by anyone.

It sounds so nice...

A world where no one could ever hurt us again. Where we could live happily together until death did us part.

"So instead of challenging the mid-boss, why don't we just spend the rest of our time here living life together to the fullest? I know this place is dangerous, but I think we could make a good run of it," she said, apparently sharing my thoughts. "We can spend our days making out and our nights sleeping in each other's arms. We could go even further than that... over and over until we get tired of it. We could just live happily ever after together."

There, Erin took my hand and placed it on her chest. What she was suggesting had never been more tempting. Spending the rest of our days together would indeed be a happy way to live out our lives. The heartbeat I felt against the palm of my hand stirred a strong impulse within me.

"Erin..."

I tried to find the right words, but she beat me to the punch.

"But you'd never go for that, would you? I can tell by your face. You're not giving up on challenging the mid-boss."

"Yeah."

She was exactly right. I couldn't allow myself to give in to a daydream when I'd already promised her something real. I'd promised that I'd get her home. I didn't want temporary salvation—I wanted her to know true salvation.

"I thought as much. I just needed to make sure. Even if you didn't want to take on the mid-boss, I'd never hold it against you."

"Thanks."

I was genuinely grateful for her consideration. I was stunned, even. It was hard to believe this was the same Erin I'd known before we were stranded here.

"Besides... we can always do all of that once we're out of the dungeon."

"Then... I'll definitely make it out of here alive. I promise I'll make it to you, Erin."

When she smiled, I couldn't hold myself back from hugging her. I now had another reason to live. I could no longer settle for sacrificing myself if I needed to.

"This warm and fuzzy feeling is kind of making me sleepy," I admitted.

"What's with that? Never mind. Let's just rest up for tomorrow," she suggested.

"Goodnight, then," I whispered.

“Goodnight,” she whispered back, laying her head on my chest.

I reached over with my free hand and ran my fingers through her hair. It was fine, fragile, and a little rough, yet for some reason, I just wanted to keep touching it forever.

If I closed my eyes, it would be tomorrow before I knew it... I’d never dreaded the dawn of a new day as much as I did in that moment.



The Boy Who Chases Shadows

My joints cracked with a dry sound as I stretched. My whole body was unsurprisingly stiff. There were no beds on floor 20, so we were forced to sleep on the hard floor with nothing more than a blanket.

We ordinarily would've at least had bedrolls when staying overnight in the dungeon, but we'd kept our gear to a minimum when we ventured into floor 17. Traveling light made for an easy retreat in an emergency, after all.

Okay, I'm all set...

I looked myself over as I finished stretching. I hadn't slept well with Enemy Search up, but I wasn't going to let that hold me back at this point. With the final fight ahead of me, I was already more wide awake than I'd ever been.

I glanced toward the mass at the center of the room at the end of the long corridor. It was far enough away that it only looked like a speck from here, but I was bitterly aware of its presence and the threat it represented. We were talking about the mid-boss of floor 20. It went without saying—there was no way I could defeat it. Instead, my task here was only to distract it while Erin escaped out of the other side of the room before fleeing myself.

It was a simple battle, really, where the key to victory was merely staying ahead of my opponent. Despite that, it was a reckless endeavor. Even if I used every trick I had up my sleeve, I still wasn't likely to escape. Just because I'd polished my evasive arts over the last month didn't mean I had what it took to stand up to the mid-boss of floor 20.

But...

I looked at the girl standing beside me. Her long, silver hair that she usually kept tied up in pigtails was undone and disheveled. Life on floor 20 had been rough on us. The best we could do for bathing was wipe ourselves down with Erin's water magic. If I took a deep breath, I could smell her sweat. The nails on her fingers, tightly entwined with mine, were chipped and broken. Her skin was bone dry. She was so ragged and weary...

And I wanted nothing more than to protect her. That was the singular thought on my mind.

"Erin, can I say something?"

"What now...?"

Her voice was trembling, and I could see my wavering reflection in her uneasy eyes.

“You remember the plan, right?”

“Yeah. You distract the boss while I quietly slip around the edge of the room to get to the safe zone. Once I’m there, you’ll come too.”

“That’s right. That’s why I want you to promise me something.”

“What is it?”

“Promise me you won’t help me, no matter how ugly things get. Don’t use a single spell even if I’m about to die.”

“You want me to abandon you?” she asked, her tone harsh and her brow furrowed.

“No, that’s not what I’m asking. I told you we’d go home together. But in order to make that happen, I have to focus entirely on the mid-boss. The slightest distraction will get me killed. So I need you to make absolutely sure you don’t do anything to draw its attention, okay?”

“You’d better be telling the truth...”

“You have my word.”

Trust me... I can't die here. After all, I promised you that we'd make it back to Puriff. That I'd help you find your hope. We're going to do so much together...

“Fine,” she finally relented when she saw my determination.

I was relieved, and then surprised. Erin closed her eyes and gently lifted her puckered lips toward mine.

“What... pfft... are you doing?”

The silly look on her face made me burst out laughing.

“Wh-What are you laughing for? Hurry up already.”

“And do what?”

I knew what she wanted, but I was having fun playing dumb.

“K-Kiss me, duh!”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Then you shouldn’t have to ask!” she declared, turning away in an angry huff. But she seemed more embarrassed than anything. Her face was red all the way to her ears. “Are you not... going to kiss me, then?”

“I gotta ask... Why now?”

“The mood just seemed right, you know?”

I had to concede that much. The mood was perfect.

“Isn’t there something romantic about sharing a kiss before we risk our lives? It’s like something straight out of a movie,” she mumbled.

“You’re surprisingly romantic, huh?”

“All girls are! Now hurry up. Are we going to kiss or not?”

“Yeah... maybe not.”

“Huwah?!”

What? What was that noise supposed to be? Just how surprised are you? Damn...

“I was so sure that... Did I have the wrong idea? Did I do something wrong?”

Erin’s lips quivered as her eyes darted around nervously. I could hardly keep myself from laughing again.

“No, nothing like that. You’re just too funny... Pfft! Oh man, you’re cracking me up!”

“Don’t tease a poor, innocent girl! You jerk!” she fumed with tears in her eyes.

“Sorry, sorry. I swear I didn’t mean anything by it,” I said, bowing my head apologetically. “It’s just that, if we kissed now, I might be content enough with life that I give up the ghost against the mid-boss. I want something to live for, you know?”

“So... it’s not because you don’t want to kiss me?”

“No, I’d love to kiss you. But I want it to feel like a reward.”

“Then I forgive you... But it’s a promise, Note. We’re going to kiss once we make it home.”

“All right.”

Erin looked up at me, her cheeks still flushed. If that was the last thing I ever saw, I was pretty sure I’d die happy. But now that I had our first kiss to look forward to, I wouldn’t go down easy.

“I’m off, then,” I said, untangling our fingers so I could wave goodbye.

“See you soon,” she replied with a smile.

That clinched it for me, reaffirming everything. I had to come back alive.

I could see the mid-boss just up ahead. It was a giant warrior several times my size. Dark crimson smoke rose from the joints of its gleaming silver armor. Its face was covered by an ogre mask, so there was no reading its expression. All I could see was that its eyes were glowing red.

In its hands was a naginata that glinted even more menacingly than its armor. It implied a terrible sharpness to the blade. A simple scratch from that thing would undoubtedly take my arm off.

Yeah, there’s no way I can beat this guy...

The closer I got, the stronger I could sense the discrepancy between us. It hadn’t spotted me yet because of Stealth, but if I continued into the room, it was only a matter of time before it noticed me. It wasn’t too late to turn back yet. That was what I told myself as I stepped forward, closer and closer to the mid-boss.

The moment I set foot in the chamber, a storm of intimidating

pressure blasted me. I nearly seized with fear at the violent air, but rallied myself and dismissed Stealth.

"I'm going to win!" I shouted as I channeled all my hostility toward the armored warrior.

The sudden panic of being sent from floor 17 to 20. The looming fear of death that had haunted us all this time. The fragile state of Erin's mind, and the past she'd revealed because of it. And now, the trial of facing the mid-boss alone.

I converted every unfairness I'd suffered into rage, then unleashed it upon the enemy before me.

I won't let you target Erin. I'm your opponent, so bring it on.

I poured my heart and soul into Bloodlust to get the mid-boss's attention, and it seemed to work. We met eyes.

Good. It's focused on me.

Once I was sure of that, I took another step forward. An unnaturally long one—I'd used Blink. I was nearly upon the mid-boss in a single stride. I accelerated, and then...

"...!"

I quickly aborted Blink. I used my back leg to leap horizontally, putting a swift halt to my forward charge. I was essentially hurling myself to the side.

Not a second later, a silver streak tore through where I was originally going to land. It was the mid-boss's giant naginata. And it didn't stop there. It continued to cut through the air, almost as if being drawn toward me.

"Withdraaaw!" I yelled as I leaped backward again and again to gain distance.

I was desperately activating Withdraw successively, but the armored warrior didn't even hesitate in its pursuit. It lashed out with deadly blow after deadly blow, each of which I was only dodging by a small margin. I couldn't hold out at this rate. I was going to die.

The mid-boss was getting closer and closer to me as I got closer and closer to the edge of the room. I didn't want to end up with my back against the wall, literally, so I switched to using Stream as my main form of evasion.

Suddenly, something rushed past my head so powerfully that it knocked me off balance. Several strands of my hair went flying. And that was just from brushing past me!

Fear of imminent death sent a violent shudder down my spine. It was like my body temperature dropped several dozen degrees. Like the surface of my skin had frozen over. The chilling dread had my teeth chattering noisily.

It's okay... Just keep this up and you'll be fine...

The corners of the mid-boss's mouth lifted up, revealing its teeth.

Behind it, I could see Erin running across the opposite side of the room.

Good...

That meant the first stage of our plan—getting Erin through the mid-boss chamber unnoticed—was a success. I was so preoccupied with the fight at hand that I hadn't noticed.

But it's fine... Everything's going fine...

Digesting that fact made my body feel a tiny bit lighter. Not for any real reason, mind you. It was purely psychological.

With Bloodlust on full blast, I repeatedly used Stream to evade the mid-boss's attacks. I made sure to keep his attention on me so that he wouldn't notice Erin, but I was quickly hitting my limit. It was hard to call what I was doing "evasion" at this point. I was just moving, and his attacks just happened to miss by coincidence. I couldn't even see their trajectory anymore.

That left me only my senses to rely on. I clung to my instincts, that faint intuition I had honed crossing swords with Jin countless times.

There was no way this mad recklessness could continue forever. But I couldn't stop either. I had long lost the leisure of thinking ahead. I was purely living in the moment, singularly focused on simply staying alive.

I leaped, I crouched, I drew near, I twisted. I yearned for oxygen. My eyelids strained to blink. My body protested, pleading for mercy... and I ignored it.

One more second. Just hold out for one more second. That's all I need.

I'd lost track of how many times I'd begged like that now, asking for the unreasonable. My body was already trying to give out on me. I honestly felt a little betrayed.

I don't care if you're tired, arms. I don't care if you're stiff, legs. We're in this together. Once I'm dead, so are you. So just bear with it and stick this out with me.

I managed to pull myself together, but I still felt the clock ticking. It was like something was being torn away from me with every second that passed. I didn't even know if I was activating Stream properly at this juncture. I could barely think.

Even so, I kept my body moving in spite of what it might cost me. My arms felt like they were going to fall off. My legs felt like they might explode. My spine felt like it would snap in half. But even so, I kept moving.

The question was why. Why... was I doing this again? What was the reason? I wasn't even sure of my end goal anymore. I knew there had to be one; I just couldn't remember what it was. I suppose it was irrelevant. At this point, survival was the goal. That was all that

mattered in the moment.

So I silenced my doubts and put all the rising questions in my mind to bed. The mid-boss was about to begin a new series of attacks, and I had to avoid them all. Everything else was trivial.

I desperately slipped through the onslaught, fleeing the mid-boss's naginata. Once I could no longer feel my limbs, it finally set in on me...

The countdown to my death had begun.

The armored warrior's attacks would catch me soon. How many more minutes did I have? One? Not even. I wouldn't last that long. It was impending. Perhaps only ten or twenty seconds away.

And then it's all over...

I continued to use Stream, which had lost all sense of form, moving my body without pause. I didn't even care about why right now. All rational thought was gone from my brain. Every cell I had was utterly devoted to evading the mid-boss. That was all.

Yet suddenly, my fading consciousness returned to me at the sound of a loud explosion—the signal I'd been waiting for all this time. It meant Erin had made it down the corridor to the safe zone. I was hit with strong relief, and then intense despair.

How am I supposed to shake this guy?!

I looked up at the armored warrior with silent resignation in my heart. I was a dead man living on borrowed time, after all. What did I possibly have up my sleeve to save myself?

With no good answer, I leaped forward. Standing still would have only meant a quicker death, so I decided to use what little stamina I had left to flee.

It was a thoughtless strategy, however, and I paid the price for my recklessness. A silver blade came chasing after me.

Shit, I'm a goner...

Everything in my field of vision creaked to a near halt in slow motion. I was finally able to see the trajectory of the naginata that had been invisible to me all this time. It was unmistakable. It was going to take my head off.

And seeing the end of my life so clearly in front of me, I began to recall how I'd gotten here. The path that had led me this far.

I remembered my house in Changs, where I was born and raised.

Walking through the forest hand-in-hand with Miya.

Our painful farewell.

Meeting Jin.

The bustling town of Puriff and Arrivers' HQ.

Seeing the dungeon for the first time.

The inside of a dimly lit cell.

My date-not-date with Erin at the weapon shop.

The radiance of Roslia and her holy sword.

The vastness of the ocean the first time I saw it.

My countless sparring rounds with Jin.

That time I ended up in the bath with Neme.

And the days I spent with Erin here on floor 20.

They were all precious memories I would never forget. But of all the thoughts flashing through my mind, one stood out to me. It wasn't happy, sad, or particularly momentous—but for some reason, I instinctively latched on to it.

Sparring with Jin...

I could see him in my mind just like I'd seen him a thousand times in practice. It was a sight I'd burned into me... Jin approaching, enshrouded in shadow. The image was crystal clear. It made me think I could do it too, or at least try. Perhaps this was exactly what he'd expected from me. Or maybe that was just my imagination. Either way, I moved my body, imitating his form.

Pseudo Shadow Runner...

My vision went black. No, my eyesight just couldn't keep up with me. I already knew where the mid-boss's attack was coming from and where it was going. All I had to do was get out of the way. I bent my upper body just a little to evade, then darted forward.

Wow, the rush was intense. The wind its naginata generated as it brought it down nearly knocked me to the side. It was so loud that I couldn't hear anything. It was like everything had gone dead quiet, just like my vision had been blotted black.

Yet in spite of that, I knew what I'd just done. I'd gotten past the mid-boss.

And in this very moment, I was getting farther away from it. I was far enough now that it couldn't catch me with a single step or swing. I knew because, even though my sight had failed me, Enemy Search kept me apprised of my opponent and Mapping told me where the exit was.

I was home free. I just had to keep moving.

The armored warrior tried a wide, sweeping slash next. I bent forward, stooping so far that my face nearly grazed the ground. I used my feet, my hands, and Blink—everything I could to scramble forward. Once I was sure I'd dodged the attack, I then activated Pseudo Shadow Runner to push my speed to its absolute limit.

And I knew, in that moment, that the mid-boss had just lost its last chance to kill me.

I won...

Just like that, I left the room without turning back. My vision was flickering in black and white. White noise rattled my eardrums. My senses were slowly catching up with me.

Ah, I've reached my limit...

I even started to feel my limbs again as I dismissed my Pseudo Shadow Runner. I wanted to give my body a pat on the back for holding out for me, but I couldn't afford to celebrate just yet.

For with the next trembling step I took forward, I felt a shock so strong that I thought for a moment there had been an explosion at my feet. I was riddled with such intense pain that I collapsed instantly without even the chance to brace myself. I hit the floor hard, rolling with my forward momentum.

It hurts... It hurts so much... This pain is unreal... Someone save me... I'm... I'm dying... What is this? Why does it hurt so bad...?

It wasn't just my feet, either. It was my whole body. My arms, my throat... Everything was racked with pain. It felt like my limbs had all ruptured. It was so incredible and overwhelming that I hadn't felt a thing from the fall. It all hurt so badly that I wasn't even sure you could call it "pain." That hardly began to cover it.

Even though I wanted to scream out, my throat burned too badly to muster my voice. I had to wonder if my lungs had been crushed. They felt like they were full of fire. And then there was my head. It must have been crushed too. My temples were tight and pounding. My vision had gone completely white. I couldn't hear anything apart from my own heartbeat, either.

This was probably the price for rushing a sloppy Pseudo Shadow Runner. I'd pushed myself too far. My body just couldn't keep up with the image in my head, and the recoil put me in my current condition. Every bone, every muscle... every last cell was screaming in protest.

The fact that I'd been able to activate Pseudo Shadow Runner at all was a miracle. I'd done it without thinking. I'd given myself over to my instincts and allowed them to guide me. But if I had slacked off in my training with Jin even a little, or if my will to survive had wavered for even a moment... I wouldn't be here right now.

I'll have to thank Jin later for showing me Shadow Runner, and Erin for giving me a reason to live.

"If I make it home, that is..." I muttered from where I lay like a caterpillar.

I couldn't lift a finger—I tried. I wasn't even sure my mouth was actually moving when I tried to talk. I had absolutely no strength left.

As my consciousness began to fade, thoughts of the end set in on me again. I'd pushed my body beyond its limits, and I could now feel it starting to shut down on me. Even if I didn't die right away, some monster would eventually find me here, and...

In the end, all that awaited me was death.

I resisted the idea. I didn't want to die. Yet, at the same time, I was filled with a strange sense of satisfaction. If I met my demise here,

the Arrivers would grieve for me. Probably Erin most of all.

That's right... Erin...

I didn't want to make her cry. I wanted to get back to her and see her live a happy life. But... wasn't making sure she reached the warp crystal enough? I couldn't shake that thought. I'd achieved my minimum goal. For someone as powerless and insignificant as me, wasn't that enough?

I knew I'd promised to return home with her, but I couldn't move like this. Reaching Puriff would be impossible. I'd have to settle for what I'd already accomplished. That would have to do.

Yeah... That's good enough for me...

I let go of life and let my consciousness drift away, but someone grabbed my shoulders and pulled me back. I could tell who it was even though I still couldn't see anything. This warmth was unmistakably Erin.

“.....”

I couldn't hear what she was saying. My worn-out brain refused to process sound.

“.....”

Yet somehow, I could tell her words were gentle. She'd come back in order to save me.

I felt my body being pulled upward. I wasn't sure what was happening. Erin was probably trying to carry me. I could feel something warm against my chest. Her back, I imagined.

With clumsy, dragging steps, we proceeded forward. Toward home.

My feet trailed along the ground. My body was jostled in every direction. This was just about the worst way to be carried, but in spite of everything, all I felt was relief.

Thank God Erin's here...

And with that singular thought, I relaxed and closed my eyes.

Girl Meets Boy

When I awoke, my vision was black. No... there were vague shapes in the darkness, so it wasn't that I couldn't see. I rubbed my eyes, and as they slowly adjusted, I recognized the furniture and walls around me. It was a familiar scene.

This is... my room.

It finally dawned on me that I was really back in Puriff. It had been so long since I was here last... I was instantly stricken with restlessness. I immediately stood up and checked the clock. It was apparently three in the morning. I opened the curtains to check, and sure enough, it was pitch black outside.

After moving around a bit, I also took note of my body. It felt light. And better yet, it didn't hurt anywhere. I rolled my shoulders and lifted my legs, but everything worked great. I wasn't in any distress, much less pain.

Neme must have healed me up. I'll have to thank her later.

With little else to do, I decided to take a bath. We'd spent at least a month in the dungeon, so I was dying to get the dirt and grime off of me. Even though I wasn't a bath fanatic, I was *definitely* going to take a long soak tonight.

The lights were off downstairs. Everyone was probably asleep at this hour. So I quietly gathered my things and crept down the hall without making a sound.

After my leisurely bath, I quietly headed back upstairs and noticed a light on in the third room down the hall—my room. I didn't remember leaving it on when I left, so I hesitantly opened the door to find a silver-haired girl sitting on my bed in her pajamas. She smiled lightly when she saw me.

"I'm here."

"Well, you shouldn't be. Don't go into people's rooms without permission."

"Who cares? It's just you and me."

"You say that, but I know you'd get mad if I went into your room without asking."

"I wouldn't mind, actually..."

"O-Oh..."

Well, this was awkward. Maybe unbearable was a better word. I

was baffled as to why she was playing that card now...

Actually, when I stopped to think about it, we *had* gotten a lot closer in the dungeon. I hadn't had the luxury of thinking too deeply about it while we were struggling to survive, but it was a lot more striking now that we were back home. We'd even held hands, hadn't we...?

"More importantly, Note, is a lecture about sneaking into people's rooms all you have to say to me? I was hoping for a more emotional reaction."

"Sorry to disappoint."

When I bowed my head, Erin turned away in a huff. She then patted the bed next to her. I figured she was asking me to sit, so I obeyed.

"So, what brings you here at this hour?"

"I came to check on you. You slept all day, you know."

"Has it really been that long...?"

"Yeah, I was worried. You should've said something when you woke up."

"I didn't want to wake you up if you were asleep... Would you have preferred I did?"

"You don't need to be so polite. Here I was, unable to sleep because I was wondering when you'd wake up..." she mumbled, looking away.

If she was going to embarrass herself saying it, she didn't have to say it—is what I thought as I bashfully looked away myself. I was pleased she was being so open with me, but I was at a loss as to how to respond. I was alone in my room with a girl. Sitting beside her on my bed, no less. It had never bothered me in the dungeon, but my imagination was running wild now.

"I'm sorry, Erin..."

"It's okay..."

And with that, we fell into awkward silence again. My rampant imagination was keeping me from thinking of anything to say... I didn't know how to have a conversation with Erin anymore. How had we done it before? How did we talk on floor 20? The more I thought about it, the blanker my brain went.

"Should, uh... Should we go wake everyone else, then?"

"That can wait, can't it? I want to stay with you a little longer."

"Sure..."

No escape, huh? Wait... what am I acting so pathetic for, trying to run away like this?

In order to regain my cool, I tried steering the conversation to something harmless.

"How did everyone react when we returned?" I asked.

“They were shocked, of course. They all looked like they were seeing ghosts.”

“I wish I could’ve seen that... But I guess that means they really thought we were dead, huh?”

“We were missing for nearly two months, after all. They apparently sent out search parties but were starting to give up hope.”

“After two months, I guess so.”

Hearing how much time had really passed was strange. It felt like I was out of sync with the outside world. Almost like I wasn’t entirely here. Not Erin, though. She’d had longer to process her feelings.

We sat in silence for a few moments before she turned to me with a concerned expression.

“What are you going to do from here, Note?” she asked.

I flinched a little when I saw the serious look in her eyes. Scratching at the back of my head, I tried to figure out where she was going with this.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if you’re going to keep dungeon diving.”

The unexpected question hit me like a jolt. The answer couldn’t be more obvious for me, but for Erin...

“If you’re asking me that, then you—”

“That’s right. I’ve decided to quit dungeon diving,” she said plainly. “What we just went through was terrifying, and I never want to do it again. Moreover, I realized that I won’t find what I’m looking for in the dungeon. So I’m going to take some time to figure things out.”

There was no bitterness in Erin’s eyes as she spoke. This was the earnest conclusion she’d come to after thinking things over. She hadn’t joined the Arrivers with a clear goal in mind, after all. It was just one step in her journey toward atonement. And if she was ready to move on, we all needed to respect that. If nothing else, it would be worse to have her linger in the party if her heart wasn’t in it.

“I’m happy for you, Erin. If that’s what you’ve decided, then go for it.”

“Really? I kind of wanted you to stop me...”

“Why...?”

“I have this annoying thing called a heart, you know...”

“Yeah, that is annoying.”

“Anyway, what are you going to do, Note?” she asked again, peering into my eyes.

She could ask me as many times as she wanted; my answer wouldn’t change. It was decided long ago. I didn’t even need to hesitate over the choice.

“I’m going to keep going. I decided I was going to conquer the

dungeon, and that's still my goal."

"That's too bad... And here I thought we could live a quiet, peaceful life together," she muttered, flopping backward onto the bed. "We could start dating and forget about dangers like dungeons and monsters. We could even get married one day and live happily ever after..."

"That doesn't sound bad either."

"But you're still going dungeon diving, right?"

"Yup."

"Guess this means you're dumping me," she grumbled with pursed lips.

"That wasn't a rejection, you know?"

"But you're going to prioritize dungeon diving over me, right?"

"That may be true."

"At least deny it."

At that, she turned and kicked me in the stomach. Gently though, almost like she wanted to play footsie. I let her knock me over so that I was now lying next to her on the bed.

"How about I keep dungeon diving while you live a peaceful life in town? That way we can go on plenty of dates on our days off."

"What's with that? I don't want a husband who's going to die in the dungeon on me. Being alone is awful."

My invitation—which took quite some courage to offer—was all too readily shot down. But more importantly, when had she decided we were getting married and that I was going to die? My inner thoughts were busily shifting from disappointment to confusion when Erin suddenly spoke up.

"I'll go dungeon diving too, then."

"Huh? Didn't you just say you were going to quit?"

"That was when I thought you were going to quit too. If you're not leaving the Arrivers, then I'm not either."

"Is that really the right thing to do? You sounded like you'd given this a lot of thought, yet you're letting my decisions change your mind."

"Not really. I told you that what I'm looking for isn't in the dungeon... But if you're going to be there, it gives me a reason to stay."

"What does that mean?"

"You, Note. You're what I'm seeking. And if you end up in danger with some stupid mage instead of me, you're a dead man. I'm the best there is, remember?"

"You weren't that much help on floor 20, you know?"

"That was then. I'm going to do better from now on. I'm going to study lots and become a better mage so I can protect you."

“I’m looking forward to that.”

I rolled over onto my side, and Erin followed suit so that we were both facing each other. She was so close that I could feel the warmth of her breath.

“Shall we pick up where we left off?” she asked.

She was smiling wide enough to reveal her teeth, but I decided to play dumb.

“Where we left off with what?”

“You know, *that*.”



“What’s ‘that?’”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. I want to hear you say it for once.”

“You mean kissing?”

“Yeah. We could go further, too.”

There, Erin closed her eyes. Her thin, pink lips pressed together. My eyes were glued to their gentle color as I placed a hand on her slender shoulder. And as I slowly moved my face closer...

“Hold it right there! What in the world are you two doing?!” someone demanded as the door flew open with a bang.

Shocked by the sudden noise, I sprang up.

“Wuh?!”

“Wh-What?!”

Erin and I both startled to see Roslia striding into the room.

“I came to get some lovin’ from Note now that he’s back, and here I find you two going at it instead! What gives?! You were totally trying to kiss, weren’t you?!”

Crap. Normally I would’ve noticed someone coming with Enemy Search, but between the relief of being home and the heat of the moment I was getting into with Erin, I’d hardly been paying attention. Come to think of it, I hadn’t noticed Erin when I was on that date with Roslia either... What a freakin’ useless art. I mean, it was my fault for getting so distracted by a girl that the rest of the world just kind of faded away, but still.

“You can’t seduce Note, Erin!” Roslia declared, pointing at the mage.

Who would’ve thought the day would come that Roslia cared about who was seducing whom? This really ought to give her pause about her own actions.

“I’m not seducing anyone. This is consensual, right, Note?”

Ah, putting me on the spot, huh?

Honestly, I hardly knew how to respond. I was a little baffled by the whole situation. Wasn’t Roslia’s affection for me just an act? So what was she so worked up over? Was this also part of her scheme? I had no idea what was happening anymore.

All I knew for sure was that it was embarrassing to get caught in the act trying to kiss Erin, so I stuck with playing dumb.

“Sorry... I just woke up, so I’m still half asleep and not sure what’s going on...”

“T-Traitor!”

“Note, I’ve been watching from the door so I already know you’re lying... but don’t you think that excuse is a bit too lazy? I’m honestly a little disgusted right now.”

Yeah, go figure that wouldn't work. Even I was surprised at my inability to make excuses. I was left scratching my head awkwardly when I caught Erin's uneasy gaze. It was my intention to explain to her why I'd lied later, but her trembling eyes made me feel terribly apologetic. Maybe being honest was better after all.

"Okay, yes, I was lying and you're exactly right... I, Note Athlon, tried to kiss Erin Fortlord."

God, that was so embarrassing to put into words! It was even worse that I had to say I *tried*, rather than that I *did*!

I nervously glanced over at Erin, who, to my surprise, was nodding in satisfaction. It wasn't my place to point it out, but what I'd said was pretty low even for me. She shouldn't have let me off the hook that easy. I was starting to worry a little about our future together...

"So that's how it is, Roslia. We were about to make out, so can you read the room and get lost?"

"No way, Erin! Ugh! Now I'm even *less* inclined to leave!"

"I was trying to be considerate, you know. I personally don't mind kissing Note in front of you."

Hey, I mind!

"Getting assertive, are we? I thought I smelled trouble on you before, and now it's finally come to this... The misattribution of arousal is a fearsome foe indeed, I see."

"So get lost already."

"You leave me no choice but to play my trump card... I didn't want to do this because it hurts me too, but alas..."

"What? What trump card?" Erin asked hesitantly when she saw the glint in Roslia's eyes.

Even I was swept up in the atmosphere and gulped nervously.

"You should know, Erin. You said it yourself—that intraparty romance is forbidden. Remember? And I'm sure someone so proud would *never* go back on their word, right?"

"Gah, I did totally say that! What were you thinking, past me?!" Erin yelled, clutching her head.

It was true that Erin herself forbade romance within the party shortly after Roslia joined. Of course, Roslia objected at the time, but...

Erin looked to me pleadingly, seeking assistance.

"Sorry... You did totally say it..."

"Yeah, I totally did..."

"See? Thus, with a heavy heart, I must stop you two from going any further."

"What kind of punchline is this?! We were just getting into the mood and everything!"

Please, Erin, not so loud! You're going to wake everyone up—

In truth, Jin was already in the room. And it was just about then that Force popped his head inside.

“Yo. Long time no see, Note,” he called casually.

“Wow. Nice to see you too, Force,” I replied.

“He’s just putting on airs,” Jin interjected. “Despite appearances, he was rather worried.”

“That so?”

Things were pretty lively now. The noise must have roused Neme too, for a small figure wandered into the room rubbing her eyes.

“What’s all the racket...? I’m trying to sleep, so can you guys keep it down...?”

“Good morning, Miss Neme. Thank you very much for healing me.”

“N-Note?! You’re awake?! G-Good morning! A-Are you okay?! I’m not dreaming, right?!” she asked, reaching out to touch me and make sure I was real.

With her entry, the Arrivers were all finally together. As for the cause of the commotion in the first place, Erin and Roslia...

“We were so close, too... Why?”

“So this is Note’s bed, huh? It smells so nice!”

Erin was crouched in the corner of the room sniffing, while Roslia had climbed into my bed without permission.

“Hey, Note. Roslia and her usual antics aside, what’s Erin whining about?”

Don’t just casually condone Roslia’s behavior like that, Force. Also, I’d rather you didn’t pry too much.

“She’s, uh... Erin’s just having a hard time after being in the dungeon for so long,” I tried to explain.

“Really? She seemed pretty normal earlier...”

“Uh...”

Ah, yeah. Erin was the one who’d dragged us back to town. She’d already talked to Force and the others, so there was no way that excuse was going to fly.

“Well, you see, Force—”

“Hey, can you maybe put a sock in it, Roslia? If you do, I’ll overlook the fact you jumped into my bed.”

“Don’t mind me, then!” she called, diving under the covers.

Look, I said I’d overlook it, but I didn’t say you could keep doing it..

“Hey, what’s going on here, Note? What are you hiding?” Force asked suspiciously.

“I-I’m not hiding anything...”

“Liar. I can see it in your eyes.”

You're pressing too hard, man. Nothing happened and rehashing it here and now won't benefit anyone, so just leave it be. You don't even wanna hear it. You'll be more upset than anyone since I was this close to kissing a girl.

"Ooh, ooh! Neme knows! Note's trying to hide something perverted!"

God, why does she have to be right now of all times?! Normally her wild statements are way off the mark... She must have come full circle and hit this one on the nose by sheer dumb luck!

Erin and I were definitely headed for more than just a kiss, so there was no way I could deny it if this interrogation continued. At this rate...

"Nah, that's impossible. This is Note we're talking about, y'know? He and Erin would never do anything like that."

Oh, thank the stars Force was an idiot! I'd never been more grateful he took me for a loser, even though that felt weird to think.

"If nothing else, Note, your return has certainly brightened things up around here," said Jin with a smile as he turned to me.

And I was just thinking the same thing. It was the middle of the night, yet everyone was so excited. But... of course they were. This was our grand reunion. Even I was elated. Thrilled, really.

"I'm so glad you made it back. Honestly. Thank you."

My tear ducts started burning when I heard Jin say that. I truly was happy to be back. This familiar energy had finally made me realize it. I was home. All of my hard work, in the end, had paid off.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. Long time no see. It's Udon Kamono. With this, volume 2 has now been published. Thank you very much to everyone who was involved. In the afterword of the last volume, I wrote something ridiculous about how I'd already planned out the afterword for this one. I would now like to proceed according to plan.

Light novels are composed of two main elements, text and illustrations. I'm in charge of the text, but I'm neither a professional artist nor a designer. That's why I leave the artwork to Shizuki and the editor. I even try not to make specific requests, but I made one this volume. I intend for it to be the first and last time.

As for what that request was, I wanted Erin in a swimsuit and hooded jacket in the front matter (the colored images at the beginning of the book). What can I say? I think a girl in a hoodie over a bathing suit is the best thing ever, so I asked Shizuki to pretty please include that. A swimsuit alone just isn't good enough.

According to my logic, the hoodie indicates a certain hesitance on the part of the girl about showing herself off, which only multiplies the charm of the swimsuit. I hope everyone gets to see that. What am I even saying, I wonder...?

Learning that this was what I really had in mind for the afterword all along must be disappointing to everyone. For the record, I'm going to start drafting the afterword for volume 3 now.

But first, the acknowledgments.

To the illustrator Hitomi Shizuki, thank you for the wonderful art (especially the swimsuit and hoodie). To my editor Soyama, thank you for all your hard work through these busy times. And finally, to my readers, I truly appreciate you picking up this book. I hope we meet again in the next volume.

-Udon Kamono

Udon Kamono

Ill. Hitomi Shizuki

2



Mapping:
The Trash-Tier Skill
That Got Me Into a
Top-Tier Party



*His image was crystal clear in my mind.
So I moved, imitating his form...*

**Pseudo
Shadow Runner!**



Erin Fortlord

Nickname Overwatch



Gear

Staff

Party

Arrivers

Role

Mage

Skills

Mana Pool - Superior

Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Grants a limitless supply of magical energy.

Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: The ability to convert magical energy into any element.

Cooking - Minor

Rarity: R (Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: The ability to discern whether or not an item is edible, the quality of its taste, appropriate preparation methods, et cetera.

Spells

Black Thunderbolt

Single target. Lightning aligned. Releases a black thunder-clap. Dependent on the caster's magical energy.

Light Brand

Single target. Light aligned. Projects a ball of light that pierces its target with countless magical blades from the inside.

Lightning Rush

Area of effect. Lightning aligned. Fires a directional attack that levels anything in its spread.

Absolute Zero

Area of effect. Ice aligned. Projects a ring of light that delineates the boundary of the spell; dramatically decreases the temperature of everything within.

Bonus Short Stories

Life at HQ

Just moments ago, Roslia Minkgott officially became one of us—an Arriver. As such, she was formally invited to move into our party house. I was currently in the middle of showing her what life was like around HQ.

“This is the washroom. The bath and shower are here too,” I informed her.

“Ooh, you have a shower? I don’t know how to use one, so why don’t we hop in together and you can show me?” Roslia cooed.

“What are you on about?! As *if* that would be allowed!” exclaimed our angry mage.

That was Erin, of course. She claimed to be tagging along as a chaperone—to make sure I was explaining things properly. I wasn’t exactly sure why a tour of HQ required a chaperone, though. If Erin was so worried about the job, why wasn’t she doing it herself?

“You twist the knob and water comes out! It’s just like a faucet!” she continued to roar.

“Like this?” Roslia chirped.

“Hey! Don’t just turn it on willy-nilly! You nearly got me wet!”

“Oh, sorry, my hand slipped... I didn’t *mean* to...”

“That’s such an obvious lie! No one who’s actually sorry uses that dumb excuse!”

“I’m serious. You’re getting in the way of my alone time with Note, so my hand slipped to try and get rid of you...”

“Then you totally did it on purpose!”

The two of them continued to bicker fiercely.

Honestly, I felt like we were never going to get through this with Erin around, but I could already imagine what she’d say if I asked her to leave: “You want to be alone with the vixen that badly?!” Instead, I kept my mouth shut and proceeded with the tour.

“So, the door across the hall will take you to the kitchen—”

“Hey, Note! Don’t just act like nothing’s happening! Help me put this woman in her place!”

Jeez, this was turning into a real pain. Roslia was only teasing Erin because her dramatic reactions were so amusing. Nevertheless, I figured I could throw a word in edgewise so she’d quiet down...

“Don’t get her sick, Roslia. At least spray her with warm water.”

"That was not what I meant, Note, and you know it!"

"H-Hey, Erin! Don't spray over here too! Now the floor's all wet!"

"Shut up! This is your fault for screwing around!"

Erin, showerhead in hand, had avenged herself by hosing me down. Thanks to that, the bathroom floor was now soaked.

"Ugh, okay... Let's get on with the tour once I clean this up..."

"So, this is the kitchen. Erin's mostly in charge of the cooking, but Jin and I will step in to help whenever she's busy."

"Ooh, so you can cook, Note?"

"Nothing special. I can make a passable meal, but I'm no match for Erin."

"So Erin's the party's chef, huh? That means if I can surpass her, your mouth will belong to me, Note!"

"That may be a little difficult, honestly. Erin has a cooking skill, you know?"

"Really?!"

At that, Erin quickly turned away and mumbled, "Well, yeah..."

"Tch! There's no way I can best a skilled cook... But I'm surprised. I assumed Erin had combat skills."

"Two of them are, yeah. Superior Mana Pool and Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude."

"Those are amazing magic skills! And you have a cooking one too? I'm so jealous."

There, Roslia shot an envious look at Erin, who seemed rather bewildered by the situation.

"Really? Cooking skills aren't that useful..."

"That's not true at all! They're perfect for winning over men! They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, after all! You're so lucky!"

"Well... That's true, I suppose..."

"What's with that attitude? I rarely ever praise other women, you know? You should take pride!"

"Is that something you should be admitting so proudly, Roslia?" I cut in. "Anyway, Erin's got a complex about it because Minor Cooking doesn't exactly fit in with her other skills, okay?"

"Ooh, so it's Minor Cooking?" Roslia said with a grin as she peered at Erin. "What's wrong with Minor Cooking? Minor Cooking is a great skill. I wish I had Minor Cooking."

"Stop repeating it on purpose! I know you're making fun of me!"

"I'm not making fun of you, Minor Cooking! I would really love to have Erin!"

"Stop it! You said that backwards! You're making it sound like you want *me*!"

“Oh, goodness no... I don't have any interest in women.”

“Enough already, you two,” I finally interjected when they fell back into bickering. We were never going to finish the tour at this rate. “Let's just take a second to calm down, Erin.”

“Shut up! This is your fault for bringing up Minor Cooking in the first place!”

“You're blaming *me*?!”

“And here we have the second floor. Neme's room is first, then Erin's, then mine.”

“So your room is the third door? Don't mind if I—”

“Don't you dare!”

There, Erin darted forward and stood in front of my room like a wall. Roslia, however, stopped short and made a break for a different door.

“Ha, you fell for it! I'm really after *your* room!” she cried.

“Hey! Wait!” Erin shouted after her.

But the door swung open before us, revealing the interior of Erin's bedroom.

“You know, we've lived together for half a year, Erin, but I've never been in your room before...”

“Don't just let yourself in so casually!”

“Did you hear her, Roslia?”

“I think she's probably talking to you, Note.”

“I'm talking to both of you!”

Erin tried yanking on our arms to stop us, but Roslia and I both continued into her room without any intention of backing down.

“This is kind of, you know...” Roslia mumbled.

“Yeah...” I agreed.

“It's really plain,” we said in perfect unison.

“Oh shut up, you two!”

“I was expecting something a little more interesting,” Roslia remarked.

“I know, right? I was hoping to find some cute stuffed animals and tease her for still being so unexpectedly innocent at heart,” I added.

“Ew, why are you so gross?” Erin hissed, looking at me coldly.

Hey, come on. Calling me gross is a little harsh... It kind of hurts...

“Ooh, so Note likes girls with a softer side! I'll be sure to put stuffed animals in my room!”

“I don't think even that would give *you* a soft side, Roslia...”

“What about a dark side, then? I can do voodoo dolls!”

“That's genuinely taking things too far.”

“Say, Erin, can I get a strand of your hair?”

“So what, you can curse me?! Ugh, I don't even care anymore...”

Just get out of my room!”

Things continued in such a chaotic, pointless fashion afterward that Jin had to give Roslia a proper tour at a later date.

The Ultimate Guide to Puriff’s Hot Springs: Heat Up Your Hearts and Friendships Here!

Jin and I were relaxing in the living room when Neme walked in the front door one day. She seemed to be in an unusually good mood, as she was humming some mysterious song to herself.

“Hmm, hmm, hmm! Heehee... I can’t wait to read it! Hmm, hmm, hmm...”

“What are you humming about, Miss Neme?”

Upon closer inspection, she was carefully cradling something in her arms. And based on what she’d just said, it appeared to be the source of her current excitement.

“Did you buy something while you were out?” I asked.

“Wanna see?” she replied eagerly. “I’ll make a special exception and show you!”

Neme then placed her prize on the table. Jin seemed interested too, so we both leaned forward and curiously peered at it: *The Ultimate Guide to Puriff’s Hot Springs: Heat Up Your Hearts and Friendships Here!*

“Another weird magazine...?”

We’d been through this before with an *Ultimate Date Guide* or something... These magazines really had terrible names. Who wants to “heat up hearts and friendships”? That’s just cringey.

“Why buy such a lame magazine, Miss Neme?”

“Neme likes reading these! It’s fun to imagine all sorts of things while you browse them!”

Ah, so she was the “daytrip by daydream” type. You could imagine the experience without ever actually going... How economical.

“Do you ever visit any of the places you read about in these magazines, Miss Neme?”

“Nope! I don’t have anyone to go with!”

“That’s not something you should say so proudly...”

“Then do you wanna go with me, Neme? We’ve been in the bath together before, so it won’t be a prob—”

“Stop, stop, stop! What are you saying, Miss Neme?!” I practically shouted as I covered her mouth in a panic.

“What? It sounded like she just said... No, couldn’t be,” Jin murmured, seemingly under the impression he’d misheard Neme.

Whew, that was close... I mean, I couldn’t really say it was close

when she straight-up let the cat out of the bag like that. So in order to avoid any further discussion of the matter, I turned to Jin and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Is this area famous for hot springs or something?”

“Hardly. This is the first I’ve ever heard of any around Puriff...”

Huh... As I flipped through the pages of Neme’s magazine, I could see exactly what he was talking about. All the featured hot springs weren’t *anywhere near* here. It was hardly fair to call them “Puriff’s hot springs.” What a sham.

“So, which hot spring are you interested in, Miss Neme?”

“Hmm... One like this!”

With that, she pointed to a page entitled “Great for Couples! The Top Hot Spring Inns With Mixed Bathing!”

It boggled my mind when she chose to be overly honest and why. Even if that was where she really wanted to go, saying something like “somewhere with a pretty view” would’ve been the safer answer in front of other people, you know? At least, that’s what I would’ve said.

“I’d like to take my boyfriend here for our one-year anniversary, I think!”

“Huh?! You have a boyfriend, Miss Neme?”

“No way! Are you trying to tease Neme?!”

“Oh, so you were just speaking hypothetically...”

Thinking about where to go for your anniversary when you weren’t even seeing someone? Now *that* was sad. Delusional, even. Note to self: *get a girlfriend soon before you end up like her.*

“Ahem! Neme will now announce her ideal hot spring date!”

“You’re sharing another one of your delusions?!”

“Should we stop her, perhaps...?”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, Jin. I’m afraid she has no shame when it comes to her delusions.”

“The two of you are too loud! Be quiet and listen!” she declared, slamming her tiny hands on the table. “The boyfriend I’ve dated for a year will be older than me... Or maybe my age! Younger is okay too, actually!”

“So you’re starting with your make-believe boyfriend?”

“Older, the same age, or younger... Doesn’t that cover all the possible options?”

“I told you two to be quiet! Anyway, my boyfriend and I are going to take a nice, long trip to the hot springs via carriage from Puriff. I’ll be so exhausted from my busy day-to-day schedule that I fall asleep in the carriage. Yes, I’ll accidentally doze off drooling on his shoulder...”

“Do you have to be drooling?”

“Like I said, I’m extremely exhausted from my busy day-to-day schedule...”

“Even though you live like a shut-in whenever we’re not in the dungeon?”

“Be careful, Note. That boomerang will come right back around at all of us.”

“Touché...”

Jin and I nodded silently to each other while Neme carried on without a care.

“But at last, we finally arrive at the hot springs! Then it’s time to get in the spring together and show off my bewitching body! It’ll be a one-hit KO!”

“Wait, your *what*? It certainly wasn’t a knockout when I saw it.”

“What was that, Note? Did you just say—”

“No, Jin, sorry. I think you’re imagining things.”

“Sure, we’ll go with that.”

“I’m glad you’re so understanding, Jin.”

That was close... I got so caught up in the conversation that my mouth was moving faster than my brain. But again, I guess I couldn’t really say it was “close” when I straight-up said something I shouldn’t have.

“Then, after we’re done bathing, we’ll have a delicious meal over some drinks.”

“It finally sounds like we’re returning to normal territory.”

“Then I’ll get a little too drunk and my boyfriend will have to carry me to my room. Then we’ll climb into bed and—”

“Okay, never mind. There’s nothing normal about this. Stop right there. I don’t want to dive any deeper into your fantasies.”

“I have to agree, Neme. I think it would be best, for your own sake, to call it a night there.”

Thus we swiftly closed the curtains on this particular episode of Neme’s delusions.

The Urban Legend of Puriff Beach

Within half an hour of hitting floor 4 of the Dungeon of Puriff—in other words, Puriff Beach—the six of us had finished changing into our swimsuits. We then set out our beach towels and parasols before hitting the water. I was personally more interested in training than playing around like this, but I’d decided to be a good sport about it for the morning.

I followed after Jin, who’d eagerly declared that we *had* to go swimming while we were at the beach... But he took off so fast that he left me standing in the chest-high shallows all alone. I didn’t think he

was going to take swimming that seriously. I mean, what happened to party bonding?

For the record, Force had disappeared the instant he spotted a pretty lady in a sexy swimsuit. As for the rest of our party... I could sense Roslia approaching from behind via Enemy Search.

She called out, "Note! Save me!"

Wondering what was going on, I turned around to see her covering her voluptuous breasts.

"My swimsuit washed away!" she cried.

"How?!" I cried in turn.

I'd never seen someone *actually* get their swimsuit washed away at the beach before. So that really happened, huh? Wait—more importantly, this scene was way too erotic! Roslia was standing there with nothing more than her hands covering her bare chest!

I looked away in a panic and sounded the alarm: "Force! Jin! It's an emergency! Requesting immediate backup!"

"W-Wait a minute, Note! I was lying about my swimsuit! Don't call Force over here!"

What?!

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself, during which time Roslia put on the swimsuit top she'd had hidden somewhere.

"Why would you lie about that, Roslia?"

"I just wanted to see you flustered."

"That's no reason to joke about losing your swimsuit..."

"Have you never heard the urban legend of Puriff Beach before? They say the waves here snatch young ladies' swimsuits all the time."

"What kind of urban legend is that?" I asked, exasperated.

But right on cue, I heard a girl scream from somewhere nearby...

"Ah, hold on! Oh no! The waves took my..."

"Wait, wasn't that Erin's voice?!" I panicked. "Don't tell me the urban legend is real!"

Roslia and I both whipped around to see Erin, who was reaching out for the receding waves.

"Ugh, the sandals I left out got washed away," she moaned.

"How misleading..."

"Really..."

Erin then noticed us and came stomping over, her pigtailed bouncing behind her.

"What's with that reaction, you two?! Are you enjoying this? Those sandals were brand new, you know!"

Wait, why were we getting scolded because she left her sandals out? We weren't standing there watching for fun... It was just coincidental bad timing. Honestly, Erin.

The Big Happiness of Little Miracles

It had been roughly a month since we ended up on floor 20. Erin had nearly cracked a couple of times, but she'd mostly managed to recover herself by this point. It was just barely, but we were managing to survive together. We were slowly adjusting to life here—learning our way around, memorizing monster spawns, et cetera—that made things comparatively easier for us.

“No luck finding the warp crystal today either...”

“We walked a good ways, too...”

We'd just decided to call it a day exploring, and we were settling down to get some rest. There were no monsters nearby, so we could actually relax a little. We pulled up our blanket and got to chatting a little.

“I guess going home's not in the cards yet,” she whispered.

“Yeah, but it's all right. We'll be back before you know it,” I encouraged.

“You don't have to try so hard to keep my spirits up. It doesn't bother me that much.”

“Yeah? I'm glad.”

It seemed I could lay off a little, then. There was light in her eyes again. It was a good thing. As I nodded in satisfaction to myself, she turned to look at me.

“You're surprisingly kind, Note.”

“Hardly. Are you kidding?”

“I'm not. Of course there are times you *aren't* nice, but you've been nothing but kind to me lately.”

“You think so...?”

That was really because Erin's psyche had been so fragile. I couldn't say anything harsh to someone who was already on the verge of breaking. I wasn't inherently kind like she was suggesting. In fact, I was so blunt that there were times even I got fed up with myself.

“I've been wondering lately...” Erin said with a small pause. “What would life have been like if I'd met you at school? Maybe I wouldn't have quit...”

“What, like if I were your classmate?”

“Yeah.”

I'd never even thought about that before. What *would* life have been like at a magic school? I'd only ever heard about them in passing, so trying to imagine it took some work.

“I guess we probably wouldn't have been friends, huh?” I said after a while.

“What?! Really?!” Erin exclaimed.

“Well, think about it. I wouldn't have stood out much as a student. And I'm not exactly great at making female friends.”

"Yeah, I can see that..."

"So I can't think of a scenario where we would've gotten close."

"I wasn't the type to talk to boys much either, so you might be right..."

"Even if we'd had the chance to talk, you'd just lash out at me, right? Like when I first joined the party."

"Yeah, I would have."

"So I'm pretty sure I would've kept my distance from you on purpose."

"Isn't that a little mean?!"

"You're the one who'd bite my head off if I didn't, you know?"

"Fair point..."

There, she hung her head. She was so close that I could feel her warmth through our clothes as we talked.

"In the end, Erin, I think it's for the best that we met as Arrivers. We probably wouldn't have gotten along if we'd met at school or anywhere else."

"Isn't that kinda sad?"

"It's just how people are. No matter how many times we're reborn, there's no guarantee who you'll fall in love with or befriend. It's all about time and place. If either one is wrong... even lovers and the best of friends can become mortal enemies, you know?"

"Yeah, if we'd met under different circumstances, we might have just bickered all the time."

"If you think about it, that's exactly how things started out between us."

"We didn't exactly get off on the right foot, did we?"

With that, the two of us grinned at each other. We stayed like that for a little while before another thought seemed to cross her mind.

"So what if I'd grown up with you in your village?" she asked.

"That would make us childhood friends..."

I recalled what life was like back home and tried to imagine it. Reflecting on my childhood memories was bittersweet now, but what if I'd spent those days with Erin instead?

"Well, we couldn't have kept our distance like we might have been able to at school. Changs is a small place, so there weren't many other kids my age. We probably would've ended up playing together."

"Do you think I still would've been mean to you?"

"Yeah, I bet I would've cried a lot as a kid. I'd go running to the grown-ups saying, 'Erin's bullying me again!'"

"Just imagining it is making me feel bad... What about when we were older?"

"When we were older, huh? It wouldn't have been too different from how things were before we ended up on this floor, don't you

think? Not exactly close, but not on bad terms.”

“That’s a little different from what I was imagining...”

“What were you imagining?”

“I think I would’ve developed a soft spot for you. Even if I was hard on you, I’d be pleased you always did everything I told you to. You might be unhappy about it, but you’d still do it anyway.”

“That’s oddly specific...”

“I thought long and hard about it.”

“Would we really be happy like that?”

“I think I would, at least. I’d have the perfect henchman and live comfortably with you at my beck and call. You might feel differently, though.”

“I’d be your *henchman*? You’d bully me that badly? I bet I would’ve run away before I let that happen.”

“If you left... I guess I’d suddenly realize how horrible I was to you and regret it all. ‘If only I’d been nicer,’ I’d cry, but it would be too late. I guess that’s not too different from how things played out for me at magic school.”

“These hypotheticals are getting kind of sad.”

“Who cares? They’re hypothetical. As long as we’re happy now, that’s all that matters.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

There, we couldn’t help smiling at each other again. Without any other entertainment on floor 20, we spent all of our time talking to each other like this. It was a fond pastime by now.

“But doesn’t it all make you feel like this was meant to be?” she asked, looking into my eyes.

“What do you mean?” I asked back.

“I mean, if we’d met some other way, we never would have opened up to each other like this,” she replied without hesitation. “So it’s kind of a miracle we ended up this way.”

“I guess that’s what people call destiny.”

“You know, you’re going to regret saying embarrassing things like that the moment we get back to Puriff.”

“Aw, come on...”

Granted, she was probably right. It was a miracle we’d gotten so close to each other—one that sustained me through these dark days.



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